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Boogiepop 4
NOVEL



Boogiepop

in the Mirror

—PANDORA—

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"Yeah, sorry
we're late."

"Hey."



"What's that
supposed to
mean?"

"Yeah, even
Mitsuo beat
you."

"We'd better
get going."

"You aren't
usually late.
Is this a sign?"



"...Look
who's
talkin'."



"Now, now, let's
just think this
through."



"'Blood',
huh? Can't
exactly
draw that."



"Hmm... This is tough. Just
need some sort of hint..."



"That I don't know"

"I smell
like
'blood'?
Whose
blood?"



"Bwahaha, some use
you are!"

"Yeah, that's
the key."

"But I always
have fun, no
matter the
outcome."

"Or maybe this
was just that
satisfying?
Wish it was
always like
this."



“Argh, I'm bushed!
But today was
kinda fun.”

“The air was
bad, we're just
high on CO
fumes.”

“But today
was kinda
fun.”

“Good point.”



Boogiepop
in the Mirror
—PANDORA—

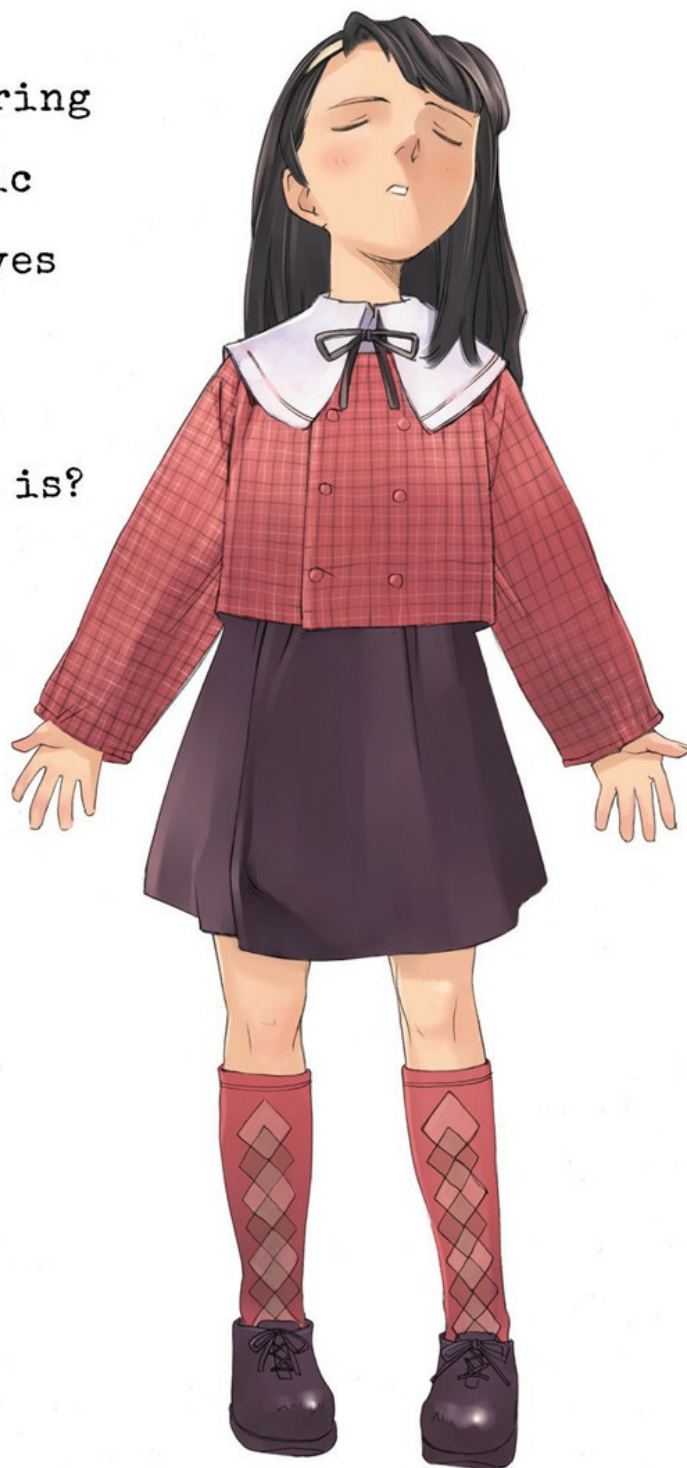
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really know what time it is?



BOOGIEPOP IN THE MIRROR: PANDORA
BOOGIEPOP IN THE MIRROR 「PANDORA」

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Prologue

Two girls talked on their way home from school at sunset, taking a road that ran by the river.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes! There's absolutely nothing about that in the Bible.”

“So how come everyone writes about it like it's a big deal?”

“Kirima-san! You know Kirima Seiichi always said not to believe what ‘everyone’ says!”

“Fair, but... my dad wrote about this somewhere, right?”

“No, he never did. I read this in a book by Malet.”

“Kazuko, I swear you're way smarter than my dad ever was.”

“Th-that's not true at all. But the point is, Cain may have killed his brother Abel, but he never felt guilty for it, and God forgave him. That's all it says in the Bible. There was no lifelong burden like in the movie *East of Eden*.”

“Wasn't there a...sign? I thought he was marked in some way.”

“Yeah, that part is from the Bible.”

“So didn't that lead to everyone pointing fingers at him? You'd think it would.”

“That's where everyone's got it wrong. The mark God put on Cain was to prevent anyone from harming him because of his crime. Any injury inflicted on Cain would be paid back sevenfold. In other words, he was basically given official license to do whatever he wanted.”

“Haha, like the idle vassal to the shogun.”

“And the Bible does go into what happened to Cain after that. He founded a town, had a happy family, and achieved great success in commerce, industry, agriculture and the arts. He was the foundation of everything we know today as

‘culture.’ The man who killed his brother in a fit of jealousy became the progenitor of everything we consider great.”

“Is that really true?”

“That's all it actually says.”

“He never regretted any of it? It said he became a wanderer, right?”

“That’s all latter-year interpretation. I mean, even in the Middle Ages, when the church considered it a sin to fail to take the literal word of the Bible as truth... even *they* broke that rule to interpret this as God preventing injury to Cain to teach him the meaning of sin.”

“Huh.”

“I know it’s hard to process, but...like, it feels like reality as we know it, right?”

“It does, yeah. But, Kazuko, you’re... You know...”

“Weird?”

“Yeah, very. Getting all worked up about a topic like this.”

“I don’t think I’m nearly as weird as you, Fire Witch.”

“Hahaha, that's for sure!”

“Hehe...”

The two friends laughed happily.

“So what else, Professor Suema? Any other world-wide mistakes bothering you?”

“‘Professor’? I hate it when people call me that.”

“Can you blame them? You know more than most real professors do. You’re a Goddess of wisdom and knowledge.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Totally.”

“Argh!”

“Haha, sorry, sorry. But...is there?”

“Hmm... Well, what about the box?”

“Box? Like...the myth?”

“Mm. The box containing all unhappiness and evil.”

“I know the story. It was given to a girl who opened it out of curiosity, and in so doing ruined everything.”

“Yes, that one. And she hastily closed it, leaving behind...”

“‘Hope,’ wasn't it?”

“Doesn't that strike you as weird? Why was hope included in a box of misfortune and evil?”

“Good point.”

“Once again, everyone's been given a simplistic interpretation that gets the true nature of the story wrong.”

“So what *was* the last misfortune left behind?”

“‘The future.’”

“Huh?”

“To be more precise, premonitions and harbingers. In other words, the greatest misfortune is to know for certain what is going to happen.”

“/s that ‘misfortune’?”

“I mean...you know everything. You know the good coming your way as well as the sad partings. You've already seen what's going to happen. If we knew all of that, how would we go on living?”

“.....”

“But because ‘the future’ stayed trapped, people were able to hold on to the faint glimmer of hope that someday better things would come. That's the point of the story.”

“I see...”

“The girl given the box was named Pandora... A name that means ‘she who has been given everything.’”

Boogiepop in the Mirror

パ ン ド ラ



1

THE SIX
Our Gang

The Six - Our Gang

The boy's name was Mikage Kasumi. He was seventeen. An outcast. He'd been expelled from school a year before, and done nothing much since. There was little point in going home, as nobody but he lived there anymore. He'd never bothered to get a job. Instead, he just spent his days wandering the town, hanging out with friends. He was part of a gang of six--four boys and two girls. Kasumi had no idea where they lived, or what schools they went to. All he knew was what they could do. He had a 'talent' himself, and the only people who knew it were the six of them.

There are twelve karaoke joints within a block of the main road alone. They're clustered in the high-traffic areas—the farther you go from the station, the fewer there are. But there's still over a hundred of them dotted across the city. Not that I've ever actually counted, but since we started using the private rooms of karaoke joints to do our thing, we've changed venues every time without ever needing to visit the same place twice.

"Room for one, sir?"

I requested a room for six for three hours. The part-time clerk didn't look any older than me, and when he looked confused, I explained, "The rest are coming later. We're meeting up here."

"Fine, but...if they don't show, you're paying for them."

"I know. I got money."

He snorted. I didn't blame him. I was wearing a school uniform and didn't look like I had that kind of cash at all.

"You meeting some girls?" he leered.

"Some of them."

He cackled.

“Hope they don’t stand you up!”

That was no way to treat a customer. This was not a well-run business. We’d been hitting a lot of those lately.

But...places like this were better for us. The ideal location for us to gather.

“Sure,” I said, and headed for the room he indicated.

I didn’t start singing when I got to the room. I’ve always hated karaoke. But karaoke rooms were the ideal location for a group of teenagers to hang out for hours on end without arousing suspicion.

I sat doing nothing, just staring up at the cheap lighting on the low ceiling.

I could hear muted singing from the room next to mine, and the room next to that. The more into it they were, the better for us.

I undid the front of my uniform. I’d taken off the buttons with the name of my school, and replaced them with new ones. I didn’t know why I was still wearing the thing this long after being done with the place. I guess I just didn’t care what I wore, and with the uniform, I didn’t have to think about it. Or maybe because it was black? Like funeral clothes.

I’d added a large pocket to the inside of it. There was a metal lump the size of my palm inside.

A small gun. Loaded.

“Oh, Kasumi-kun. Lookin’ gloomy as ever.”

The door opened and one of the six, Nanane Kyoko, poked her head in.

She was... well, she was *tall*. Like 170 centimeters. About the same height as me. Despite that, she had a baby face, so she didn’t look grown up, but also didn’t look like a kid. I had no idea how old she was. She insisted she wasn’t twenty yet. She was wearing a man’s jeans and jacket.

“I ain’t gloomy.”

I closed my uniform back up.

“Then don’t sit there staring at your weapon all pleased with yourself! You

look like a total psychopath. Hehe.”

Nanane had a large gym bag slung over her shoulder, and she heaved it off onto the floor.

I knew what was in it, so I shook my head at her sheer nerve. How could she be so cavalier about carrying that around?

“You oughta be more careful with how you handle that shit.”

“Whatever. You keep worrying about everything, you’ll look even gloomier, Kasumi-kun.”

She brushed me off, which just made me mad.

“I said, knock it off with the ‘gloomy’ thing. And don't use my name! I hate it—it’s a girl’s name.”

Nanane just laughed. “You know, Kasumi-kun, I’ve been thinking... No, never mind.”

“Wh-what?”

I couldn’t just let her leave it unsaid. She shot me a sort of sexy smile, and said, “Nah, I thought better of it. Don't want to be mean, do I?”

She sure looked awful grown-up for such a baby face.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said, frowning.

“Yo, you two fighting already?”

A man about my age came in, looking worried. Koumoto Kouji.

He had chiseled features, with angular cheeks and sharp corners, but his eyes were on the large side, which made him look strong-willed. He was technically our gang’s leader.

Of course, that was mostly because the rest of us had no interest in trying to wrangle the group.

“It’s nothing,” I said.

“I tried seducing him, but he shot me down,” Nanane chuckled. Koumoto was not the sort of dude to pick up on jokes like that, and he looked at me, alarmed.

“Y-yo, Mikage! We can’t have trouble like that...”

He sounded serious, so I quickly cut him off.

“Sh-she’s kidding! Nanane’s yanking your chain.”

Nanane laughed harder. “How can I resist?! Look at you!”

Koumoto just glared at her.

“Look, Nanane Kyoko-san.”

“What?”

“Do you even see yourself as part of our team?”

“I do! Totally. I mean, I’m only this upbeat when I’m with you. Not like I have other friends. The rest of the time I’m, well...gloomy.”

“Yet you keep yelling at me for calling you that?” My voice was louder than I intended.

“Keep it down. I could hear you outside.” Another member from our group, Kazumiya Mitsuo, chided us as he walked in. A big, muscle-bound dude, he was built like a tough guy, but had a sweet, gentle face and curly hair. Mitsuo reminded me of a dumb prince from some old animated movie.

“Tch,” I scowled, but let it drop.

“Sorry,” Nanane said, and bowed her head. I’d gotten used to these rapid switches in attitude with her.

“F-forget it,” I said.

Mitsuo gaped at us. “Lover’s quarrel? You two dating now?”

This clown always oversimplified things.

None of us bothered answering, so he looked at Koumoto.

“Kouji, *are* they?”

“I dunno,” Koumoto said. Still grumpy.

“Look, I’m not saying them going out is a *bad* thing!” Mitsuo said, totally meaning it.

“We aren’t, okay?” I said. Again, a little too loud.

“What? What’s going on?” asked the fifth member, our other girl, poking her head out from behind the door. Tsuji Nozomi was unremarkable. She was cute enough—on the small side—the sort of girl you found anywhere.

“Apparently Kasumi-kun and I are getting it on,” Nanane said.

“God damn it,” I said.

“Oh, that explains it,” Tsuji said, closing the door behind her. She put her sketchbook on the table.

“You’re just...cool with it?” Mitsuo asked.

“It’s none of my business. None of *our* business,” she said, shrugging. “They can do what they like. Not like they’ll be able to get any useful data, just the two of them, so they can’t exactly split off on their own.”

“I guess that’s true,” Mitsuo nodded, gravely.

“That’s not the point,” Koumoto said, completely fed up with the whole thing. “First of all, Mikage and Nanane aren’t actually dating. And let’s not just offhandedly talk about people leaving the group. Tsuji, you have a bad habit of malicious speculation.”

“Just the way I am.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a bad influence.”

Nanane grinned. “I don’t mind.” She winked at me. “Do you, Kasumi-kun?”

I was too tired to bother responding.

“Well, I *do* mind,” Koumoto snapped.

“Argh, Kouji hates me again,” Tsuji groaned. She flopped down, staring at the ceiling, as I had been a minute ago. I felt a momentary connection.

The six of us weren’t from the same neighborhoods. Koumoto and Tsuji were the only two who’d already known each other—they’d gone to the same elementary school. But the rest of us never had anything to do with each other until we started gathering like this, in secret.

Sometimes I thought about how strange that was. It felt so natural for us to

be like this, like everything else was just bullshit.

Koumoto protested, “See? You always have to act like—”

Thud.

The door slammed open, and the last member sauntered in.

Everyone turned to stare at him.

Tenjiki Yuu.

It sounded like a girl's name, but like me, he was a guy. But he was cute in a way that got him mistaken for a girl a lot. He was rail-thin, impossibly skinny.

“H-hey, everyone. Um... Am I last?”

He always spoke hesitantly, but with a smile. Yuu’s right arm was immobilized in a sling, which explained his dramatic entrance and difficulties with the door. There were bandages wrapped all the way to his wrist.

“Is it *there* today?” Tsuji asked.

“Oh, no, this isn’t that. I just fell over. This time—”

“Close the door first,” Koumoto said. He stood up, reached past Yuu, and shut the door.

“S-sorry, Koumoto-kun.”

“Don’t apologize! We’re friends.”

He said that so easily. That's why he was the leader.

Mitsuo clapped his hands, once. Something he always did when he wanted to get fired up. It had become our cue.

“Let’s get this rolling. Mikage, how long do we have the room for?”

“Three hours.”

“Can you extend that?”

“We doin’ this all day?” Nanane asked. “I’m down, I looove hanging out with you all.”

“We can ask for an extension if we go over,” Tsuji said, rationally. She opened

her sketchbook.

Our two girls could not be more different.

“True,” Koumoto nodded, and turned on the karaoke machine. He punched in a bunch of random numbers and music started playing. But Koumoto wasn’t going to sing. This was just camouflage.

We set the volume low, so from outside it might sound like we were just singing quietly. The room next door was super loud, so anyone passing by wouldn't notice we weren't singing.

“Okay, then. Tenjiki, whatcha got for us?”

Yuu nodded and began taking off his clothes. With his delicate frame, it was like watching a striptease. The guys in the room shifted uncomfortably, but the girls both looked like they weren’t interested. Neither was at all embarrassed. You’d think they’d at least squeal a little! Or maybe they just didn’t even consider Yuu a guy.

Or maybe it was just that none of us were human, including them.

“See? Right here.”

Yuu pointed to his left side. There was a mark on his beautiful, pale skin, like a welt... only it was in the shape of the kanji for ‘east.’

This was Tenjiki Yuu's ‘talent.’ We called it Stigma.

“What’s it mean?”

“There’s something to the east? Something’ll happen, or something’ll come from the east?”

“Or maybe someone named ‘Higashi’?” Tsuji said, her eyes fixed on a blank page in her sketchbook.

There was a pencil in her hand, the tip hovering just off the page.

“East... East...”

Her fingers moved and began drawing something on the page.

“Is Automatic starting up?” Koumoto asked.

She shook her head. “No. I’m drawing this myself,” she said. She was drawing Yuu, standing there with his shirt pulled up, looking faintly ridiculous. Her hand moved incredibly fast. Whatever she drew ended up looking angelic, like an object of worship.

“D-don’t, this isn’t...” Yuu spluttered.

“Look, it’s sexy, don’t worry,” Tsuji said. “You’re a beautiful man.”

Yuu had dropped the pose, but the picture was already nearing completion.

“Maan, your art and your personality couldn’t be more different,” Mitsuo said, looking over her shoulder at the drawing. “You’re downright cold-blooded, but your art has a real warmth to it.”

“Is your Baby Talk active?” Tsuji asked. “Or did those words just seriously come out of that face?”

When she mocked people, it was always calmly and never with any heat behind it.

“What’s my face got to do with it?” Mitsuo had a face like a tough guy, but blushed rather easily. It never looked right.

“Hey, Kasumi-kun, can Into Eyes see anything in my eyes?” Nanane said, peering into my face. I hated meeting people’s gazes, but I steeled myself and looked into her eyes.

For someone who had trouble with eye contact, it was totally unfair that I had a ‘talent’ that required doing just that.

I glared at Nanane, searching for signs of anything in her eyes.

She was grinning at me. We must have looked very strange: a guy glaring, a girl smiling back, and everyone around them quietly watching their staring contest.

I tried to focus.

All I could see in her eyes was my own face scowling back at me.

Two years ago, I’d been going out with a girl. She ended up dumping me, but she once said, “Mikage-kun, you’ve got a gentle face, but sometimes you look

really angry. It's kinda scary.” That was the face that was staring back at me now.

I didn't look like this by choice. I didn't really like the way I looked at all.

As I kept staring, Nanane said, “You were thinking about a girl, weren't you?”

“No,” I said.

“C'mon, take this seriously,” Koumoto said.

“I am! Wait...” I tried to protest, but then I saw a change. My face vanished from Nanane's eyes, and someone else's face appeared instead. “A girl. Some kid. She's like...nine or ten? Chin's a little pointy. Big eyes like a foreigner or a French doll...”

As I described what I was seeing, I heard the scritch of Tsuji's pencil over the karaoke background music.

“Long hair, down past her shoulders. Gold hairband. Well-combed hair, she takes care of it. Red and black checked clothes with a white collar. Upscale, looks expensive. Oh, she's gone.”

My own face was back in Nanane's eyes.

I could only keep my power active for like, ten seconds.

“Mikage-kun, this look right?” Tsuji said, showing me a picture of a girl. I nodded. She always nailed it. She could totally work as a police sketch artist. Without her to draw for me, the visions I saw would be of no use to any of us.

“She's pretty cute...but I don't know her,” Nanane said, shaking her head. “Which means she must be someone I'm going to know.”

Yeah.

I had the ability to see who someone was going to meet. We called this talent Into Eyes.

It was a prophetic ability, I guess. But I couldn't see faces for people I was going to meet, and it took me the longest time to realize it was anything more than my reflection becoming distorted somehow. I never told anyone, assuming they'd think it was creepy.

Until I met the other five people in this room... none of us told anyone.

This all started about six months ago.

I'd just quit school for a bullshit reason and had no idea how to fill my days. A friend of mine had done some bad drugs in school and started swinging a knife around. He didn't have any real family, just some distant relatives, so I took a week off to take him to a rehab facility way up in the mountains, and when I got back...they expelled me.

Guess they thought I was the same as him.

Though I hadn't done any drugs, I'd definitely been close to him. So I just decided the whole thing was stupid and let them kick me out.

I told my parents I'd take the University Entrance Qualification Exam, but I hadn't made the slightest attempt to study for it.

Then in mid-February, I was wandering around the station, idly wondering if there were any decent part-time jobs, when I ran into a friend from junior high.

"Yo, Takeda," I said.

Takeda Keiji.

Keiji jumped and turned towards me, but relaxed when he saw who it was.

"O-oh, Mikage! Haven't seen you around."

"You meeting someone?"

"Y-yeah."

"For work? Or a girl?"

Keiji had been working as extra staff at some design agency since junior high. He was a good dude, but a little uptight, so I was joking about the girl.

But he shuffled awkwardly and admitted, "A girl."

I whistled.

"Yeah? You finally ready for that sort of thing? Well, that's good."

"First time meeting her today."

“Whoa... what, did you get Valentine chocolate from her? A letter in your shoebox?”

I was joking again, but he looked surprised.

“How’d you know?”

“It’s classic, man,” I laughed. How like Keiji to go old-school like that. “What’s she like?”

“Her name’s Miyashita Touka. But...I don’t think I’ve ever heard that name before...”

“Hmm?”

Curious, I met Keiji’s gaze and held it.

My reflection in his eyes changed, shifting into the face of a girl. She looked back at me with an earnest gaze, a little worried about meeting Keiji, a little hopeful. She was pretty cute.

Looks like a good kid, I thought.

I thought Keiji would probably like her.

“You should say yes, man. I’m sure it’ll work out.”

“I dunno.” Keiji looked lost, and not because he was embarrassed. “I just can’t make up my mind.”

“About what?”

“Mikage, what happens when you quit school?”

Where’d that come from? “Absolutely nothing.” I shrugged.

“Someone like me? Go to school, don’t go to school, it doesn’t matter. I just keep on living.”

“I’ve been thinking about dropping out,” Keiji said. This didn’t really surprise me. Anyone who got on well with me was probably at least considering it.

“Aren’t you going to Shinyo Academy? General Studies division?”

“I’ll be a third-year in April. Everyone else’ll be cramming for entrance exams. What’s the point of me being there?”

“Hmm... Yeah, you’ve got a different path in life.”

“But if I say that, I dunno if this Miyashita girl will understand.”

He was serious. He was always serious.

“I doubt she’s asking you out that lightly,” I muttered. The girl I’d seen looked like she meant it.

“You think?” Keiji cricked his neck.

“So, when you meeting her?”

Keiji glanced at his watch.

“Um... in like, fifteen minutes.”

He was here first? Of course he was. If he and Miyashita started going out, he was going to spend a lot of time waiting for her.

“Then I’d better vanish. You hang in there!”

I slapped him on the shoulder and started moving away.

“Um... Mikage!” he called after me.

“Mm?”

“Minegishi...I heard he died?”

“Yeah. Didn’t even have a proper funeral. Heard about it too late.”

“Shit.”

“I’m never there when it matters most,” I said.

I must have made a face, because Keiji spluttered, “No, I... I think you really handled that well. I was impressed. Getting yourself expelled trying to help a friend... I couldn’t have done it. So...”

“Thanks. But it didn’t mean anything, in the end.”

I sighed.

“Maybe you should stay in school for Miyashita’s sake?” I said.

“Huh?”

“Memories of school with her wouldn’t be the worst thing to have.”

I waved a hand over my shoulder and walked away.

I hadn't gone far when I saw a girl in uniform trotting toward me. I dunno if she'd come here straight from school or what, but she had a Spalding sports bag over her shoulder.

It was the girl I'd just seen--Miyashita Touka.

I was suddenly very amused. I fought down the smile and stepped aside to let this girl go to her first date.

But I bumped into another girl in the process.

"What the hell?" she said, clearly pissed off. She was really tall and wore big round sunglasses.

"My bad," I said. I watched Miyashita Touka go past, looking nervous, a little flushed. Only when she was gone did I step back and take a good look at the new girl. "Sorry," I said.

"What... Who was that girl?"

She took her sunglasses off. She was younger than I'd thought.

"Oh, I don't know her. But she's gonna know a friend of mine." I told the truth, expecting her to take it as a joke.

But she looked suspicious. "What's that mean?"

I wasn't sure why she was taking this seriously, but I couldn't be bothered, so I just said, "Eh, I was just trying to pick you up."

I expected her to say, "Don't be stupid," and stalk off angrily.

But instead she said, "Hmm..." and frowned at me.

Then she leaned in and sniffed.

"Are you wearing any cologne?" she asked.

"No?"

"Then you ought to be careful. I smell blood on you. Soon."

"Huh?"

I froze. Suddenly, I had the feeling that she was like me.

That was how my Into Eyes met Nanane Kyoko's Aroma.

At the time, neither of us imagined we'd end up in a gang together. Our abilities might be prophetic, but we never thought they'd be of any use.

In time, there were six of us. A gathering of people trying to catch a glimpse of the future. Our powers weren't much good on their own, but with the six of us, we could come up with an accurate prediction from time to time.

We never really talked about what to do when we managed to predict something. I guess Koumoto was pretty serious about trying to use our powers to help people. Once, he'd predicted a pregnant lady's water was gonna break unexpectedly, and was there to catch her when she collapsed on the sidewalk.

But that sort of situation was rare. Most of the time, we were just trying to find a way to use the powers we had.

Like how karaoke places exist because you can't sing as loud as you want anywhere else.

"But who's this kid you drew?"

Our meeting dawdled on, accompanied by the muted karaoke music.

"She looks rich."

"Bet she's a little stuck up, too."

"If she's rich, then maybe someone's after her money?"

Nanane folded her arms, thinking. "We don't really need any more money."

She picked the sports bag off the floor and set it on the table, unzipping it.

At a glance, you'd think it was just stuffed with random scraps of paper, but if you looked closer, you'd realize they were actually 10,000 yen notes. Not bound or anything—just a loose pile of bills.

Worth more than 10,000,000 yen, all told.

"Damn, I can't believe you walk around with all that," Mitsuo said.

"Well, I can't exactly leave it at home. What would I say if my parents found

it?”

“I stuck mine in a coin locker at the station.”

“Oh, good idea. Didn’t think of that. I’ll do that, then.”

“Hehe... I’m smart, see.”

“Neither idea’s all that great,” Koumoto snickered.

“Then what are you doing, Koumoto-kun?”

“I live alone. It’s in the eaves above the closet.”

“You’re lucky. Kasumi-kun?”

“Desk drawer.”

“Parents won’t find it?”

“They ain’t the type to look,” I muttered. They were never home. My mother had another family and my father slept in his mistress’s apartment.

“Hmm,” Nanane said, then stuck her finger out right under my nose. “You’ve gone gloomy again!”

“Gimme a break!”

“I mean...the six of us have been at this for months now, yet I’ve never seen you smile! Not for real, anyway.”

“You just smile too much.”

Mitsuo cracked up laughing. “Hahaha! He’s got you there!”

“You’re one to talk,” Nanane said, glaring at Mitsuo.

He just kept laughing.

Then, suddenly...

“What is it?” Tsuji cried out.

We all looked at her. She was staring at Yuu, so we all turned to look at him, too.

“Ah...”

Yuu had Tsuji’s drawing of the girl I’d seen. He looked back at Tsuji, confused.

“Wh-what?” he asked.

“Tenjiki-kun, you were just staring at that picture, looking very serious,” Tsuji said, pointing at the drawing. “I thought maybe you recognized her.”

“N-no, that’s not it... I just thought...she was pretty.”

“So Tenjiki’s a pedophile,” Mitsuo chuckled.

“Okay, let me have a look,” Koumoto said, taking the picture.

He frowned at it for a moment.

“Hmm...”

A few seconds later, his eyes went unfocused.

His head sagged and he began shaking.

“There he goes.”

“Shh!” Mitsuo shushed Nanane.

Koumoto’s mouth pursed, then opened. A sound like the wind rushing through a crack emerged.

This was how Koumoto Kouji's ‘talent,’ Whispering, always started.

“Ffffwww... huhhhhhh...”

It was the damndest noise. I could never believe it was a sound the human voice could make.

“Ghhhhhhaaaaaa, then...”

Words.

We held our breath, trying to catch the words.

That voice wasn’t Koumoto’s. It was someone else’s entirely.

Like the images my Into Eyes saw, this was a voice from the future. Something somebody, somewhere, was going to say.

“...rld, the world... If you want the world, then...”

A girl’s voice. A beautiful soprano, like in a choir.

“Then you can have it. If you kill me.”

We all gaped.

Kill?

To have the world?

What?

But that was all he said. Koumoto's body thrashed, he blinked...and he was himself again.

"Uunh." His eyes focused back on us. "Did it activate? What did I say?"

Koumoto never knew what he said. He always had to ask.

But none of us knew what to say. We just sat there, stunned.



2

KAZUMIYA MITSUO
Baby Talk

Kazumiya Mitsuo - Baby Talk

Kazumiya Mitsuo was the one member of the six who was still going to a normal high school—a private school, the kind with guaranteed acceptance to an affiliated college. He wasn't a troublemaker and had thoroughly average grades. His parents were ordinary middle-class people and both held steady jobs. He was not a particularly deep thinker. Not even when it came to the 'talent' he'd had since he was little, which gave him an idea of what was going to happen in the future. When he told his family that his uncle was about to die, they all just got angry with him, so he'd stopped telling people what he knew. His uncle had been very sick anyway, so nobody realized his words had been prophetic.

His Baby Talk might well have provided the most complete vision of the future out of the six 'talents' the group had, but since he didn't think too much about what he saw, his prophecies were always extremely vague. He could never find the words to explain what it showed him, and always ended up using nearly meaningless descriptions, like "Kinda creaky," or, "Oughta be fluffy."

In fact, his ability was the reason the six of them had formed a gang in the first place, six months ago. That and a significant amount of carelessness...

"Mmm?"

Mitsuo was enjoying his favorite fruit parfait at the sidewalk café by the station when a couple sat down at the table next to him.

A tall woman and a boy only slightly taller than her. They looked good together, he thought.

He knew both faces from somewhere, but couldn't remember where from, so he casually asked, "Oh, what's up?"

They turned and looked at him, suspicion registering on their faces.

“Who the hell are you?” the boy demanded.

He’d looked nice a moment before, but there was a sudden glint of steel in his eyes.

“Huh? Look, don’t you remember when the six of us—” Mitsuo started, not really thinking it through.

“What do you mean?” the girl interrupted. “We only met a moment ago.”

“Huh? That doesn’t make sense. The six of us...” Mitsuo said, and then it finally dawned on him.

Six of who?

Even he had no idea where that number came from.

Shit—he was remembering the future.

This happened to him, sometimes. He didn’t realize he was making a prediction, and got the past and the future mixed up.

“What?” the boy scowled. “Did he just say...”

“The future,” the girl said, giving Mitsuo an appraising look. “Kasumi-kun, he smells just like you. He’s gonna meet the same fate in the very near future.”

“Both of us are in his eyes, along with three others. We look like friends.”

Mitsuo couldn’t make much sense of what they were muttering at each other.

He blinked at them for a minute, but in a rare moment of insight, he suddenly got it.

“Then... you, too?” he said, a broad smile breaking out on his face.

The couple—Mikage Kasumi and Nanane Kyoko—both nodded.

“Looks like.”

“Yeah, guess so.”

When he explained his powers, Nanane Kyoko laughed.

“What the...? You don’t even know what it means? That’s about as

informative as a baby babbling to itself!”

And from then on, they’d called Mitsuo’s talent ‘Baby Talk.’

“Hot, but cold,” Mitsuo muttered, looking at a vision of ‘the world’ girl.

They’d already blown past the three-hour reservation for the karaoke room and were on their second extension. The table was covered with snacks, burgers, and leftover fries they’d brought in, and a number of empty drink bottles. They weren’t allowed to bring in outside food or drink, so if they got caught, they’d get kicked out and fined.

“As non-specific as ever,” Koumoto snorted.

“Yeah... But that’s all I got. It got super-hot for a moment, and then like, hisss... a lot colder.”

“What? Was there a fire?” Nanane asked, but Mitsuo shook his head.

“Didn’t feel like that... It’s clear, but also really not?”

“Always a riddle with you,” Kasumi said, shrugging.

For some reason he turned to Tenjiki Yuu, who’d said nothing. Their eyes met.

He frowned, and said, “Hey, Yuu. Don’t move.”

“Huh...?”

“Something weird in your eyes.”

Tsuji Nozomi quietly picked up her sketchbook.

“Go ahead.”

“Not sure if it’s a man or a woman. Feels like I’ve seen ‘em before, but can’t remember where. Pale face, dark circles under his or her eyes, black lipstick. Wearing a coat? Neck and chin buried in a black collar. Wearing a crazy tall hat like a stovepipe pulled down over the eyes. Not sure if they’re smiling or not... like they’re playing dumb? Left eye narrowed, right side of the mouth turned up, and the eyes are...”

As he described this, Tenjiki Yuu started looking nervous.

“What?” he said.

“It’s gone.”

“C’mon, Mikage-kun. Are you for real? Or are you just pulling our legs?”
Nozomi said, staring dubiously at the finished drawing.

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“‘Cause... I mean... You just described Boogiepop.”

“Boogiepop?” Mitsuo asked.

“The heck is that?” Koumoto added.

“You don’t know? Right... I guess they said only to tell other girls... You’ve heard of him, Kyoko?”

“Huh?” Nanane said, looking lost. “N-no...”

“I thought every girl around here has heard the stories.”

“Er, well... Every girl with friends.”

“Tenjiki-kun, how about you?”

“Huh?”

“You looked awfully surprised.”

“Y-yeah... I’ve heard of him. From a girl.”

“Guess this playboy here gets all the news,” Mitsuo chuckled.

Tsuji filled the group in on Boogiepop.

An assassin, or shinigami, who wore a black cape and black hat.

Said to kill people instantly, with no pain, at the peak of their beauty.

His—or her—true nature unknown, Boogiepop appeared out of nowhere and was gone just as soon.

The rumors were all kinds of crazy, but she explained everything just as she’d heard it.

“He’s supposed to be a really beautiful boy, but... well, it’s just an urban legend, really.”

As she explained, each member of the group passed around the sketch.

“So Tenjiki’s gonna meet someone dressed like that, then?” Koumoto said. He was the only one really taking this seriously.

“Some sort of cosplay?”

“I dunno, maybe he really exists. You never know when you might meet a shinigami lurking in the dark around a corner.”

“Argh, don’t! That stuff really scares me, you know!”

“Oh? Didn’t think you were the type.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

As the others chattered, Tenjiki Yuu alone stayed silent.

He sat in the corner, his fingers locked together, his head down.

“Boogiepop...” he muttered.

“What’s up, Tenjiki? Something got you down?” Mitsuo said, sitting down next to him.

“Mm... no... It’s nothing.”

“You worried about this Boogiepop?”

“.....”

“Worst thing about our predictions is, we never know when this shit’ll happen. And what we don’t know, we ain’t ever gonna know. Could be tomorrow, could be two weeks, could be six months away. You think this little girl and Boogiepop are connected?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yeah, we don’t know much of anything.” Mitsuo nodded. “I dunno what you make of him, but I’m a bit creeped out by this Boogiepop story.”

“Huh?” Yuu looked up.

Mitsuo nodded again. “Baseless rumors? Stories of sinister monsters? When you think about it, that ain’t much different from us.”

The room remained silent. Mitsuo continued, “You feel me? If anyone else

saw what we're doing, they'd think it was super weird. Not much different from these stories about Boogiepop, really."

"Hey, that's crossing a line!" Koumoto said, indignant. "We're not killers!"

"I didn't mean it that way. Just... we ain't normal. We're pretty far from what's ordinary," Mitsuo said, grinning.

"True enough," Kasumi agreed. "Koumoto, you gotta give him that, at least."

"Sure. But there're things we can do because of that," Koumoto said, doggedly.

"That's all you ever say, Kouji." Nozomi snorted, grabbing a handful of potato chips. "You could learn a thing or two from Kazumiya-kun's thoughtlessness."

Mitsuo laughed out loud. "Learn what?!"

"C'mon, Nozomi," Koumoto sighed.

"She's got a point," Nanane chimed in. "Kasumi-kun, you oughta take some pointers, too. Stop lookin' so gloomy all the time."

"This *again*?"

"Bwahaha! From today on, you're all my students!" Mitsuo threw his hands out, welcoming them all.

Koumoto put his head down, groaning, but looked up again a moment later. "Fine. We're not normal. We're freaks. But like Mitsuo said, that's not something to worry about, Tenjiki."

Tenjiki Yuu was quietly laughing at everyone.

"Y-yeah, thanks... You're all a big comfort," he said.

He clearly meant it.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a ship was floating in a harbor.

At a glance, it was an ordinary fishing vessel, but the people on deck lacked a fisherman's tan and had a dangerous gleam in their eyes. And they didn't look like they were from the country nearby.

“The Towa Organization’s onto us? You’re sure?”

“We’ve lost contact with the rear guard. Can’t reach the ‘facility’ inland. Looks like the lines are down. We should assume they’ve been wiped out.”

“Jesus...”

Whatever language they were swearing in was not Japanese.

“What now? If we stay put, they’ll find us for sure. This location’s probably already blown...”

“Shit, and we finally had a success... God damn the Towa Organization!”

The men ran through the ship to a room at the back and slammed the door open.

Inside this narrow, cell-like room was a little girl, sitting quietly. She was a very pretty girl, with a face like a doll. She looked to be around ten.

She’d been running a comb through her long black hair. With no trace of surprise, she silently stared back at the angry men.

“What do you think? If we ditch her, maybe the Towa Organization won’t hunt us down.”

“Don’t be stupid! Remember how much it cost us to get this one stable! We’ve got to get her to a buyer somehow!”

“But...”

They spoke as if the girl wasn’t there, or as if she were a thing.

Her mouth tightly closed, she glared up at the men.

“Either way, this ship’s no good. They’re onto it for sure. They’ll find us no matter where we go. We’ve got to abandon it.”

The speaker wore a black patch over one eye. He spoke in level tones, looking at each of his men in turn. He was clearly their leader.

“Yeah... let’s get moving.”

One of the men grabbed the girl roughly.

“Yo, Kit! Come on!”

She did not resist, but she wasn't exactly obedient, either. The men dragged her forcefully down the hall. As they reached the end, she suddenly wriggled out of their grasp and ran back into the room.

"Wh-what the hell?"

They ran after her and found her holding a gold hairband that had been left behind on the bed. It was clearly precious to her.

"Forgot this," she said, softly. There was quiet strength in her tone, as if she wasn't afraid of whatever fate had in store for her.

Mitsuo, Kasumi, and their group of six ultimately spent eight hours in the karaoke room without locking down any concrete details. Eventually, they gave up.

"Oh well."

"It happens!"

They gathered up their trash, shoved it in a bag Koumoto bought and hid it in his backpack, so the staff wouldn't realize they'd brought anything in.

Out in the hall, they ran into a couple from another room. A young couple, probably in high school.

"Hey, Akiko, what's up?"

Another couple was still in the room, and they were waiting in the hall for them.

"Yo, Saotome, mind if we go on ahead?"

"Yeah, I'll be right after," the boy inside called. He turned to the girl. "You okay?" he asked.

As Mitsuo and the others walked by the door, the boy inside was helping the girl up. She must have been partying hard, because she looked exhausted. Nobody thought anything of it; they walked right on past.

It was already quite dark outside.

The six said good-bye and scattered.

Koumoto had once suggested they were better off not knowing each other's addresses, so none of them knew where the others were going.

But it just so happened that today, Mitsuo and Kasumi set off in the same direction.

"You know..." Mitsuo said.

"Mm? What?"

"Do we really need to keep this shit secret?"

"Maybe. I mean, we don't have to worry about anyone ratting us out, right?"

Kasumi shrugged.

Mitsuo frowned. "But they wouldn't want to be ratted out, either."

"Sure," Kasumi said. "Unless one of us is *pretending* to have powers."

"Huh?" Mitsuo stopped in his tracks, stunned.

Kasumi didn't wait for him, so he hastily caught up.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Happens all the time on TV or whatever. The government's secret divisions keeping tabs on anyone with powers."

Kasumi didn't sound alarmed at all, but the idea had clearly never occurred to Mitsuo before.

"S-seriously?"

"I'm kidding," Kasumi said, exasperated.

"Y-you are? Man, you really got me." Mitsuo wiped cold sweat from his brow.

"But if I wasn't... you're the most suspicious, Mitsuo. Your powers are so non-specific. You could be faking it."

"D-don't talk like that."

"Well, 'talents' as crappy as ours, why bother keeping tabs on 'em?"

Kasumi sounded a little bitter.

"Crappy?"

“You might have room to grow. But I feel like Into Eyes is all it’ll ever be.”

Mitsuo stared at his feet for a minute, then asked, “Mikage, does it ever bother you?”

“Does what?”

“That we might, like...be overlooking something really important?”

“Yeah... well, today sort of felt like that.”

“I ain’t Koumoto. But even I think if we figure something out, that means there’s something we can do. Something only we can do.”

“This isn’t like you. You got a feeling about it or something?”

Mitsuo said nothing for a moment, then shook his head. “I dunno.”

“‘Hot then cold,’ was it?”

“No... Um, any idea what the Towa Organization is?”

“The what?”

“I dunno, that word just came to me.”

“What’re the kanji?”

“Would be easier if I knew that,” Mitsuo grumbled.

Kasumi stared at him for a moment and then laughed. “You sure get dark when you’re with me. You’re so upbeat when the whole group’s together.”

“Yeah?”

“You matching my style?”

“Not intentionally...”

“Nah, I mean... deep down you’re just a good dude, I think.”

“I-I am?” Mitsuo took it as a compliment and blushed.

Kasumi laughed out loud.

Mitsuo gaped at him. “What’s so funny?”

But Kasumi just kept laughing.

“Seriously, what?” Mitsuo asked, but before long he was laughing, too.

“Right, we’d better split up here,” Kasumi said, waving.

“S-sure.” Mitsuo hesitated, then made up his mind. “Hey, Mikage...”

“Mm?”

“Are you really going out with Nanane?”

“No,” Kasumi said, making a face.

“Th-then if you did get yourself a girlfriend, would you tell her about your ‘talent’?” Mitsuo made the question sound urgent.

Kasumi raised an eyebrow, but answered immediately. “Never.”

“Thought not.” Mitsuo sighed, staring at his feet.

When he looked up, Kasumi was already walking away.

Mitsuo stared after him, thinking, *Am I the only one who thinks that’s a lonely way to live?*

He was sure if he asked any of the others, they’d just wonder why he was bringing it up after all this, but he was a simple-minded man. He couldn’t dismiss his feelings that easily.

And that would decide his fate.



3

NANANE KYOKO

Aroma

Nanane Kyoko - Aroma

Nanane Kyoko called her talent Aroma. It could capture scents from the future.

However, she was lying to the other five.

She talked as if she was going to school somewhere, but in fact, she wasn't going to school at all.

She'd refused to give her exact age, insisting only that she wasn't twenty yet, but she was actually the youngest of them. She was tall enough that no one guessed the truth.

And the biggest lie she'd told was that she was from a normal middle-class family and lived nearby. Her family was a complete work of fiction.

Sometimes, when I see Mitsuo-kun looking all pleased with himself, I just get so mad.

I don't hate him or anything. I just wish we'd met him a little later, is all.

Kasumi-kun and I were the first of our group to meet. Well, Koumoto-kun and Nozomi-chan had been a dynamic duo before, but this group of six started with the two of us.

And sometimes, I wonder...if it had stayed just him and me, would Kasumi-kun and I be...a little *closer* than we are?

I'm in love with him.

But no matter how many hints I drop, he just thinks I'm making fun of him, so I always end up laughing it off.

Sure, I'm not *really* trying to let him know how I feel. I just can't bring myself to say it outright. To say, "I love you."

The six of us used pagers to get in touch. All of our pagers were taken out in Koumoto Kouji's name. He paid for them all, too.

We all had money now, but when we met we only had the kind of money kids our age have, so Koumoto-kun was really generous—at least, he spent a lot of time thinking about how we should stay in touch.

It had actually been really easy for Kasumi-kun and me—and Mitsuo-kun—to find Nozomi-chan and Koumoto-kun.

The three of us met up on a Saturday, and we hung out in the café by the station, watching the crowds, wondering if the other three Kasumi-kun saw would pass by. And they did!

“Oh! There,” Kasumi-kun said, pointing.

We looked. A boy and a girl were walking on the other side of the street. They looked less like a couple and more like brother and sister.

“Um, yeah,” Mitsuo-kun nodded.

I really couldn't wrap my head around how his power worked, or what it could tell him, so I found myself asking, “You're sure? Can we really trust you?”

And he got upset. “It's true! I dunno how... I just know, okay!” he yelled.

“Shh, keep your voice down,” Kasumi-kun said. Too late. Everyone was staring at us.

“Uh...ahaha, sorry. Nothing's going on, pay no attention to us,” I said, smiling at everyone and bobbing my head.

Everyone chuckled and went back to what they were doing.

Bright red, I whispered, “That was soo awkward! Mitsuo-kun, get with it!”

“I... I didn't mean to...”

He was as red as I was.

Kasumi-kun said nothing. I followed his gaze.

The pair on the other side of the street were staring back at us.

“Yo,” Kasumi-kun said, waving.

The boy looked at the girl. She nodded.

And then they came over to us.

I knew they'd smell like Kasumi-kun, but it still surprised me when they did.

"Seems like you know us," the boy, Koumoto Kouji-kun, said.

"Seems like you know we do," Kasumi-kun said.

The girl—Tsuji Nozomi—looked at Mitsuo-kun. "I've heard your voice before. The same thing you just shouted."

What she meant was that Koumoto-kun's Whispering had captured the yell Mitsuo-kun had just let out. His partner, Nozomi-chan, had heard it and remembered his voice. They explained the details eventually.

But at the time I was just baffled.

"Why are we suddenly a group after all this time alone?" I said.

Kasumi-kun shrugged. "Each of us tried predicting something, and predicted we'd run into each other. Guess those predictions just overlapped."

"Maybe," Koumoto-kun said. "You seem level-headed."

In hindsight, our biggest problem wasn't that we had powers the world couldn't accept, or that we got overconfident and tried to bite off more than we could chew.

It was all too easy for us to find each other, so we became friends just as easily. Everything we had, we got without *any* trouble. That was all.

That 120,000,000 yen was the same. The money itself wasn't a problem. None of us were the type to turn the sheer size of that cash pile into a problem; we just divided it up like it was nothing. But it was just all too *easy*.

Sensing something approaching, 'he' awoke from standby mode.

As a weapon of destruction, he came equipped with hibernation functionality. In protracted battles of attrition or when ordered to lie in wait for an assassination opportunity, this functionality allowed him to survive for years without resupply.

“Something caught in my trap?” he asked under his breath. After years of isolation, he’d developed a habit of talking to himself, but these words were inaudible to anyone but him. His missions were invariably solo and he rarely had anyone to talk to.

He began to move, making no sound.

This was no jungle, nor a battlefield. It was an ordinary building in a normal city. The building hadn’t had much money poured into it; there were no high-tech security systems or anything like that, just typical low-cost construction.

He was at the top of a spiral staircase, the emergency exit. It was normally closed off. He’d laid a trap there, and waited.

The bait was 120,000,000 yen.

But no ordinary human would know it was there.

Only an *extraordinary* human would ever come here.

The sort of human monitored by the system that created him. The Towa Organization.

The type that knew things they should not. That did things they should not be able to. People like that were referred to within the Organization as MPLS, but he did not know the origin of that name.

They’re here.

Light broke the darkness. Someone flipped a switch below.

He was hiding in the shadow formed where the corridor from the emergency staircase connected to the main building, completely invisible from the stairs.

The footsteps came closer.

Three males, two females... all young. Mid-to-late teens...

Tiny variations in the echoes of their footsteps told him the heights and weights of those approaching, and even gave him a rough idea of any illnesses they might have.

He heard voices.

“Mmm, here! I remember this dizzy feeling.”

“I’ve definitely smelled this moldy, dusty stench.”

“So is it really here? This treasure or whatever? Mm, Koumoto?”

“I can’t hear my own power, so you’ll have to be the judge of that.”

“I know, but...”

“Man, these stairs are long.”

“You can wait here, Nozomi.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Few listening would understand what they were talking about.

He said ‘power’...

He nodded to himself.

This group had somehow predicted their own actions and known that they would come here.

Had they come because they’d known they would, or had they come because they thought they should? Had they predicted it, or had they bent the future to their will? That was a paradox, and one where the truth would never come to light.

Either way, it wasn’t his problem.

The problem was what he should do about them.

If they were dangerous, he had to eliminate them at once. If not, he had to apprehend them. To kill, or to capture...

He waited silently as the five of them passed by, never noticing he was there.

They found the bag resting on the floor above.

“Whoa!”

Cries of jubilation.

“Holy crap, it’s real... How much is there?”

“I guess this counts as treasure? Not exactly what I’d dreamed of. Very...real world.”

“Ah... Kasumi-kun, that was it!”

“Oh.”

“That’s the phrase I predicted?”

“So weird! Hearing your own words before you say them!”

“Now you get how weird I feel all the time.”

“You’re just a weirdo, Mitsuo-kun.”

“Don’t be mean!”

They were clearly excited. But they didn’t react to the money itself the way he’d thought they would. It was more like they were just enjoying doing this at all.

“But how is this here? I mean, there’s that story about someone with too much money throwing it away in a bamboo grove, but...”

“This doesn’t really seem ‘hidden,’ exactly.”

“Abandoned campaign funds?”

“The *most* boring origin story.”

He moved quietly, drawing closer. They were busy talking. None of them were looking at the stairs.

It’s a question of numbers... five is a lot. And they’re conspiring together. I have to treat them as a significant threat.

He made up his mind.

He would have to use enough force to disable them, and kill them if necessary.

Right...!

He got ready to leap, prepared to tackle all five at once.

And just then... one of them looked right at him. A tall girl.

Her eyes met ‘his.’

———!

For a moment, he hesitated.

The girl frowned for a second and then did something he couldn't believe.

"Ahhh!" she said, pointing right at him. With a smile that radiated pure joy, she exclaimed, "I know you!"

"Huh?"

He blinked, completely thrown off by this warm welcome. He had never once in his life had anyone smile at him.

When I yelled, everyone turned and looked.

"Oh, you're right! It's him!" Kasumi-kun said. He'd seen the newcomer in Mitsuo-kun's eyes. We all knew his face from the sketch Nozomi-chan drew based on Kasumi-kun's description. He was a boy with a very pretty face.

"Er, um..."

"You know about us, too?" Koumoto-kun asked.

"N-no, I, er..." he stammered, flummoxed. "Um, why are you...here? Is that money...yours?"

Mitsuo-kun burst out laughing. "Nope! It belongs to the six of us."

"Six...?"

"Including you," Nozomi said, smiling at him. She was normally pretty poker-faced, so when she did smile, it was really cute.

He blinked at us.

We went down the stairs and stood around him.

"Hate to spring this on you, but you're one of us now," Koumoto-kun said.

"O-one of you?"

"You sound suspicious, and I don't blame you! But you aren't like other people, are you? Isn't that what brought you here?"

"Er..."

“No need to hide it!” Mitsuo-kun said, comfortingly. “We all have ‘talents.’ Mine’s called Baby Talk. Lamest name ever, right?”

“Mine’s Whispering.”

He looked around at us, mouth flapping like a goldfish.

“Uh... s-so you can all...tell the future? Like...”

“Yep,” Kasumi-kun nodded.

“Really?”

“If it wasn’t true, we wouldn’t be here, and neither would you.” Kasumi-kun shrugged. It was so like him to be blunt about it.

“So you’re all...friends?”

“And you?” I said, happily. “Want to be our friend?”

He looked surprised.

“Me? Your friend?”

“Is that bad?”

“N-no, just... I’m, you know... you can’t just trust me...” He hung his head, muttering.

We looked at each other.

And then all of us laughed.

“Wh-what?”

“Uh, you’ve got quite the sense of humor there, buddy,” Koumoto-kun said, grinning.

“Huh?”

“We can’t trust you?” Koumoto-kun said. “Don’t worry. None of us trust each other.”

“We all keep our private lives secret,” Nozomi-chan added. “You don’t need to tell us anything.”

“But...”

I winked at him. “But we’re still friends. That much we’re sure of.”

“Yeah.”

“Pretty much.”

Kasumi-kun and Mitsuo-kun chimed in.

“Friends...” the boy said, looking like a prisoner who’d seen the light of the sun for the first time in a decade.

“What’s your name? I’m Koumoto Kouji.”

We all gave our names.

“I... I’m...Yuu. Tenjiki...Yuu.”

He seemed highly embarrassed by this.

“That’s an adorable name! Kasumi-kun, you’re not the only one.”

Kasumi-kun scowled at me, but Tenjiki-kun just turned even redder.

And thus there were six of us.

A lot more happened before today—but really, nothing that’s worth mentioning.

Koumoto-kun was into helping people and had already saved a baby and called in a fire five minutes before it started—stuff like that—but me? I was just having fun.

We met up three days a week. There was no set schedule. If someone made a prediction, they’d let the rest of us know via the pagers. We mostly met up in karaoke rooms.

“Feels like a waste, though,” I muttered, one day.

“What does?” Koumoto-kun asked.

“I mean...we never sing!” I responded. “All this time in karaoke places, but...” I waved a hand at the machine quietly churning out some enka song. “Do you want to sing? I don’t really know any songs, but help yourself.”

“Anyone else?” Koumoto-kun asked.

“L-Leave me out of this,” Mitsuo-kun said, shaking his head. “I-I don’t like singing.”

“Tone deaf?” Koumoto-kun chuckled.

Mitsuo-kun went beet red. “I just don’t like it!”

“Me either,” Nozomi-chan said.

“Huh?” I straight up didn’t believe that. “But you’ve got a beautiful voice.”

“Yeah, sorry.” She glanced at Koumoto-kun. Was she checking his reaction? Koumoto-kun was too busy making fun of Mitsuo-kun to notice. I thought to myself, *She’s only saying that because **he** said he wouldn’t sing.* That made sense.

“Then, Kasumi-kun? Tenjiki-kun?”

“I-I don’t really mind, but...” Tenjiki-kun said, stiffening up. He was positively shaking with embarrassment. Nope, there was no way he was singing in front of us.

“D-don’t worry, I’m not forcing you,” I said and glanced at Kasumi-kun.

He was sitting in stony silence.

“Um...”

“They don’t got ‘em,” he muttered.

“Huh?”

“No Bob Marley, no Steel Pulse.” He sounded disgusted.

“Who?” Koumoto-kun asked, baffled. I was, too. I’d never heard either name before.

“Foreign music? I mean, ‘Bob’...”

Kasumi-kun ignored Mitsuo-kun’s question. “It’s a load of crap,” he spat. His tone was straight up hostile.

I was pretty taken aback.

“Wh-what, Mikage? What’s gotten into you?” Mitsuo-kun asked.

Kasumi-kun didn’t answer. “Look, I ain’t singing. It’s stupid.” He then glared at

me like this was all my fault. I tried to think of how to respond.

“No need to take that tone,” Koumoto-kun said. “Nanane just thought it would be fun.”

“And I’m saying it won’t be.”

“Damn, dude...”

“L-Look, it’s fine, okay? Sorry I mentioned it.”

The mood was getting ugly fast.

“If I could sing I would, but... Sorry,” Koumoto-kun said, giving me an apologetic look.

“N-no need, seriously.”

Kasumi-kun sank back into silence.

We spent the rest of the day producing predictions that weren’t of any use at all and chatting about nothing until it was time to go.

As always, it was dark out by the time we left. After saying our goodbyes, everyone decided it was time to head home.

“Good night,” I waved to them and made it look like I wasn’t in any hurry as I waited for the others to clear out.

If anyone saw which way I went home, well...that could be trouble. My current crash site was right next to this particular karaoke place.

I’d been regularly changing where I slept the last few months--staying at apartments with weekly rentals, at business hotels, at twenty-four-hour saunas. I was tall enough to pass as a businessman if I dressed like a man and kept sunglasses on, so I was able to get a room just about anywhere without a second glance. I always gave my occupation as ‘freelance writer.’

I’d wager I was getting the most use out of that 120,000,000 yen. When we found it, I was scraping the bottom of the money I’d saved before running away from home. If we hadn’t found it, I’d have been sleeping outside.

Right now I was at a cheap hotel by the station. Not one of *those* hotels, but probably a hotel that was mostly used for that anyway. As long as you had

money, no one cared who you were or what your purpose was.

*But if any of **them** saw me going in a place like that...*

So I hung around for a few minutes before slowly walking away.

The town at night smells murky, like leftover bits of the day. I felt like it was clinging to me.

I didn't feel like getting dinner. We'd eaten a few snacks during our meeting, and I had no appetite.

"Argh..." I dunno why, but I felt really down in the dumps. "I'm a mess," I muttered.

The hotel was a two-minute walk away. I'd only just arrived when a voice came from behind me.

"Yo, Nanane." It was Kasumi-kun.

.....?!

I froze.

Did he see me? Did he know I was headed into the hotel?

There was only one reason a high school girl would go in a hotel like this. Only one anyone would think of, anyway.

Crap. How could I explain this? What should I say?

I just stood rooted to the spot in silence. I could hear him coming up behind me.

"So, uh..."

"Wh-what?"

I swung around to face him. Like a jack-in-the-box, my heart was trying to leap out of my chest.

"Well..." he hesitated.

I was sure he was gonna ask what I was doing in a place like this. I almost blurted, "No, it's not what you think!" but the words stuck in my throat. I whispered, "Ah..."

“It’s just... I’m sorry,” Kasumi-kun said.

I gaped at him. “For what?”

“For earlier. I got...pissed off.”

He wasn’t meeting my eyes, staring fixedly at something to one side of me.

“O-oh, that? Forget it,” I said, still trying to calm myself down. “S-so you just came after me to apologize?”

“Yeah, I dunno. You looked depressed, so...”

“I’m fine. Nothing wrong with me. Yeah.”

I was mostly just relieved Kasumi-kun hadn’t noticed where I was going.

“W-wanna get some tea? Not here, obviously,” I said, desperate to get him away from here.

“Not here?” he said, suddenly realizing we were standing outside a seedy hotel. There was only one reason a boy would be talking to a girl in a place like this. “R-right,” he nodded.

We headed to a café we often went to. Once there, I reassured him once again.

“Seriously, Kasumi-kun, you’ve got nothing to apologize for. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

I took a sip of my coffee. It was cheap coffee, but I found the scent of second-rate blends much more relaxing than gourmet stuff brewed with the best beans.

“Nah, I was just taking my feelings out on you. I knew it wasn’t your fault. He stared at his hands.

“Well, what are friends for?” I asked. I guess I sounded a little sad, because he shook his head.

“Not that. You had no way of knowing. Just... once...”

“Once?”

He had my attention.

“Yeah, I used to have this friend. He really liked karaoke...used to make me go sing all night with him.”

“Had enough to last you a lifetime?” I said, not really thinking.

He shook his head again. “No, it’s just... he died.”

He said it so quietly it took me a moment to grasp his meaning.

“Oh...”

“He didn’t have any friends but me, really. No one else to ask. So I was always the one he dragged into it. But thinking back on it... I did the same shit to him.”

I sat in silence. Kasumi-kun continued, “He had nothing really going for him, nothing else he was any good at, so karaoke was the one bright spot in his life. He sucked at it, too... And then, before he ever got any better at it, he dropped dead, miles away from anyone he knew.” We sat in silence for a moment. After a beat, he went on. “So, like, I dunno, I just...can’t do karaoke any more. He liked it so damn much that every time I sing, I feel like I’m...praying for him. But even then, I just...”

On the table, his fingers wove together and split apart again.

“So it ain’t about you. Or the others. Nothing to do with you. So for me to get like that... I’m sorry.”

He finally looked up at me. And his face froze.

Because I was crying. Big tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Wh-what...?”

“Kasumi-kun... I’m so sorry,” I said, choking up. “Sorry, really... I didn’t mean to hurt you like that.” I wanted to sink into a hole. I can smell scents from the future, but can’t pick up on anything that really matters. I felt so horrible. I couldn’t stop the flood of tears. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“S-stop that! It’s like I did something to you, now...” Kasumi-kun stole a quick look around. But I just couldn’t stop myself. There was snot mingling with the tears and I must have looked a fright, but they just kept coming.

“L-Look, here, wipe your face.”

Kasumi-kun held out a handkerchief. I took it, but just held it tight.

“Argh, alright then,” Kasumi-kun grabbed a bunch of paper napkins from the table and started wiping my face with them.

I let him do it, like I was three years old again. Somehow...I wasn't embarrassed at all.

If I'd run out of money, what would I have done?

Given up on this runaway thing? Gone back home, back to making meals for my mother and her new lover, since she can't stop being a kept woman after flubbing the paternity suit?

Or would I have refused to ever go back there, and gotten myself a job in a massage parlor or a strip club or...one of *those* shops?

Or—and this idea was by far the most appealing—would I have wound up dead in a ditch somewhere?

But now, none of those felt real. None of them seemed like serious possibilities.

Except when the six of us were together, I'd spent months not talking to anyone else. Honestly, the times we spent together were the only thing that mattered anymore. We all said shit like, “Yeah, well, I don't trust any of you,” but the one who said that the most was Kasumi-kun, and he could be so nice to me.

“I doubt I'll live that long,” I said once, when we were all piled into a karaoke room.

“Why not?” Mitsuo-kun said, baffled.

“Just a hunch,” I said.

“You're wrong, Nanane-san,” Tenjiki-kun said. “If we help each other out, we can get through anything. I'm sure.”

Those words sounded so genuine when he said them.

“You'll help me out, then, Tenjiki-kun?” I asked, grinning.

“O-of course!” he said, nodding.

I was super happy, but I played it off as a joke.

“Kasumi-kun? Will you protect me, too?”

“Not if I can help it,” he said, grimacing. “Besides, I’ll die before you ever do.”

“There you go again! Talking like that...”

“You said it first.”

“I got no plans to let you win the futureless contest.”

“None of us have one.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“We’re all in the same boat.”

“I can’t say I get it, but, like...” Mitsuo-kun shot us both a look. “Don’t that kind of talk scare you?”

“Not really,” Kasumi-kun said.

“Nope. Facts are what they are,” I said, laughing.

Mitsuo-kun scratched his head. Mitsuo-kun himself was the least likely of us to be scared by anything, I thought.

Then Nozomi-chan turned towards us and hissed, “Shhh!” Her finger was pressed to her lips. She’d noticed Koumoto-kun going into a trance. “He’s starting up. Quiet.”

We shut up, and waited.

Koumoto-kun had forbidden us from ever recording his whispers. He argued that recorded evidence could put him in danger of being discovered. That’s why he and Nozomi-chan had partnered up. Now the rest of us were his listeners, too.

His started shaking.

The sound he made was hard to describe, like the wind leaking out of his throat.

“...ough...is the purity good enough? Go-gon... not a problem... 100% pure...

go-gon... one shot of this and anyone'll be... go-gon ...”

There was more than one person, and not just human voices—background sounds were getting mixed in.

“...can't remember the last time it rained this hard. Where'd it even come from? Go-gon... you got what it takes to pay for this volume? ... go-gon... of course... go-gon ...”

And then, like always, it was as though a switch flipped and he was back to normal.

“So, what'd I say?”

“Uh...” I said, not sure how to describe it.

“Bad news, either way,” Mitsuo-kun sighed. “Probably a drug deal.”

“What? Really?”

“They were talking about purity,” Nozomi-chan said, frowning. “And a pretty big deal. They said ‘enough cash to pay for this volume,’ so not exactly a street corner deal.”

“Whoa, jackpot, huh?” Even Koumoto-kun looked spooked. “Can we narrow down where? Let the cops know?”

“Cops won't be any use!” Kasumi-kun roared. We all jumped.

“Wh-what?”

“Those pigs don't care what happens to people!” he yelled, his face bright red. “You report this, they'll just try and figure out the route or whatever, making some shit excuse about letting them make the deal so they can follow it.”

This was so not like him.

“And while that bullshit's going on, everyone they've sold shit to is getting strung out! We gotta do something, first!”

His hands were clenched, and his whole body was shaking. He was beside himself with anger.

I'd never seen Kasumi-kun like this. I didn't know what to do.

4

TENJIKI YUU

Stigma



Tenjiki Yuu - Stigma

Tenjiki Yuu knew exactly why Mikage Kasumi was so worked up. He'd looked into his friends' backgrounds long ago.

Kasumi had lost a friend to drugs. And because he'd helped the other boy after a violent outburst caused by withdrawal, his school had assumed he was on drugs too, and expelled him. He'd known it would happen and still helped his friend. As far as he was concerned, drugs should not be allowed to exist.

"Calm the hell down, Mikage!" Koumoto Kouji yelled.

"How can I be calm?!" Kasumi yelled back. "Where are they, Koumoto? When is this happening?"

"How should I know?! I don't even know what I said!"

"Anyone? Anyone know? God damn it!"

Kasumi slammed his fist on the table.

"K-Kasumi-kun...?" Nanane Kyoko looked shocked. Kazumiya Mitsuo and Tsuji Nozomi did, too.

Only Tenjiki Yuu remained calm.

"I believe they're near a high-rise construction site," he said.

Kasumi turned to look at him. "...what?"

"You heard that noise right? Go-gon, go-gon. That's the noise of the pressurized steam used to drill shafts in the ground. The sound of a machine used in high-rise building construction."

"O-oh!"

"And they said it started raining. That might help pin down the time. They talked like it hadn't rained in a while, and it hasn't, so this may be the next day it rains."

Yuu rarely spoke at such length, and everyone was a little taken aback, but Kasumi was nodding, listening intently to every word.

“Based on prior activations, when Koumoto-kun’s ability triggers not based on any hints, but spontaneously, the event will occur nearby within the next two weeks. His range expands when he’s following up on the rest of our predictions, but no spontaneous activation has taken more than nine days to come true. It seems safe to assume this one’s within that range.”

“R-right...”

“W-wait, Tenjiki-kun...” Nozomi said, hesitantly. “Wh-when did you figure all this out?”

“I’ve just been paying attention,” he said, smiling. This was true.

This was how he justified being part of their group—he was monitoring them.

“But...”

“Kasumi-kun means business. We can’t stop him. So I thought I’d do what I can to help,” he said, gently.

“Tenjiki,” Kasumi said, eyes gleaming. Then he shook his head. “No, I’m glad you feel that way, but I shouldn’t get you mixed up in this.”

“Please, let me help.” Yuu bowed his head.

“Look, guys...this is dangerous. You get that, right?” Koumoto said.

“Of course! Right, Mikage-kun?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Okay. In that case...” Koumoto sighed. “I’ll help, too. Can’t leave this to the two of you.”

“Kouji!” Nozomi cried, but he put out a hand to stop her.

“I’ve made up my mind. I’m in.”

“Arghhh, you’re all idiots,” Mitsuo said. “But hey, I’m the biggest idiot here! At least, according to the rest of you. Can’t very well leave me out, can you?”

He laughed, rubbing his nose.

“Kazumiya-kun, too?” Nozomi asked, flustered.

Then Nanane Kyoto spoke up. “By the river,” she said.

“Huh?”

Everyone turned to look, and she shrugged.

“I smelled stagnant river water. That narrows it down, right?”

“Nanane!” Kasumi said, eyes wide.

“You weren’t thinking of leaving me out, were you?” she said, winking back.

“M-me, too!” Nozomi squeaked. Her usual cool façade was totally gone. “I’m coming, too! You’re not leaving me out!”

“Nozomi,” Koumoto started, but Mitsuo cut him off.

“That’s good, we’re all in this together,” he smiled.

“But...”

“If it gets bad, Tenjiki will protect us. That’s what you meant, right, Tenjiki?”

He was half-joking, but Tenjiki Yuu smiled back.

“Sure,” he said, nodding.

It was Saturday, so they disbanded, agreeing to meet on Sunday to hunt down the location.

Tenjiki Yuu walked off alone through the streets at night, but Tsuji Nozomi came running after him.

“Tenjiki-kun!”

“Mm? Oh, Tsuji-san. What is it?”

He’d known it was her from her footsteps alone, but deliberately didn’t turn around until she called his name.

The two of them sat down on a bench in the open area by the station, watching the crowds passing by.

“Er, um...” Nozomi said, nervous. “How—how much do you know about us?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like... earlier, you knew all sorts of things about Kouji.”

“Oh, that? I dunno that I know that much. I mean, we all have a rough idea what Koumoto-kun can do, right? I’m sure you know more than I do, Tsuji-san.”

“I...”

“You’re in love with him, right? The whole childhood friend thing.”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Yes, but...still...” She hesitated. “I...”

“Whoa, there. We said not to share anything private,” Yuu said. He knew what she’d been about to tell him: the secret about Automatic that Tsuji Nozomi was hiding from the others.

“You already know,” she said, weakly.

“But what of it? We’re all friends.”

“You think so?”

“Of course.” He smiled. “I should ask you the same thing, Tsuji-san. Do you think of me as a friend?”

“You’re a good guy, Tenjiki-kun. You were right there to back Mikage-kun up.”

“All of you are good people. I’m just following your example.”

“Thanks,” Nozomi nodded.

“Tell you what. I’ll let you in on a secret of mine, Tsuji-san.”

“Huh?” she blinked at him.

“Truth is, Tsuji-san, I’m...”

He looked so serious. Nozomi swallowed hard, waiting.

“I’m not actually human.”

“Huh?”

“I’m a synthetic human created by a giant secret society hell-bent on world domination. Don’t tell anyone.”

He was dead serious. Too serious. He was clearly joking. It was impossible to

take this any other way.

Nozomi burst out laughing.

She laughed so hard she bent over double, her shoulders shaking.

"It's the truth. Don't tell the others," Yuu said, dramatically.

Nozomi laughed again, tears in her eyes.

"G-got it, I won't tell a soul."

"I owe you one," Yuu said, smiling at last.

Nozomi smiled back. "Thank you, Tenjiki-kun. Really."

"Same to you."

"Come to think of it," she said...

But Yuu suddenly stiffened, and looked around.

"What is it?" Nozomi asked.

He didn't answer.

After a long silence, he said, "Tsuji-san, you take the train, right?"

"Y-yes..."

"Let me walk you to the platform."

He took her hand and pulled her after him into the station, bought a ticket for the last station on the line without asking where to, and pushed it into her hand.

"W-wait, Tenjiki-kun?"

"It's on me," he said, and bought the cheapest ticket available to get himself through the gate.

He nearly pushed her onto the train, then stepped back onto the platform.

"See you," he said, waving as the doors closed.

She waved back, bewildered. "T-tomorrow, then? Tenjiki-kun?"

The doors closed as she spoke and the train pulled out of the station.

Once the train was gone, Tenjiki Yuu's smile was replaced with a mask as cold as ice.

He moved to the back of the platform and sat on a bench, head down, hands resting on his knees, with his fingers locked together. A figure stood before him.

"Sup, Eugene?" it said. It formed a very odd silhouette. Its arms and legs were long and thin, like rods, but the body and head were spherical. It looked completely unnatural.

"What is it, Spooky E?" Tenjiki Yuu asked, quietly.

"What are you doing around here?" A grin spread across Spooky E's monstrous face.

It was Saturday evening. Few people would be waiting for a train at this hour. No one else stood nearby.

"Why do you ask?"

"Come, now," Spooky E said, sighing dramatically. "Aren't we both Towa Organization bio units?"

"I'll ask again: what do you want?" Tenjiki Yuu spoke in a manner entirely different from how he did when he was with the other five. His voice was a knife, merciless, like he was slicing away at the man he spoke to.

Spooky E's grin faded away.

"Who do you think you are, Eugene? This is *my* territory. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Your 'territory'?"

"Yes. I own this city! You may be B7-Tier, but you've got no right to mess up my work!"

"I don't recall consulting any C9-Tiers on their opinions." Tenjiki Yuu smiled. The smile couldn't be less like the one he'd used with Tsuji Nozomi. This smile was pure hostility.

"The hell with that! Tiers only designate the unit's purpose, not the chain of command," Spooky E snarled, baring his teeth.

Tenjiki Yuu didn't bat an eye.

"If our purposes are different, what's the problem? You're just scared you'll lose your freedom if another Towa Organization agent is nearby."

"What?" Spooky E's round cheeks quivered.

"What are you up to, anyway? Your instructions were to keep the drug contamination in the area below Level F. Market penetration on drugs is far too high."

"None of your business!" he yelled. The handful of others in the station were too drunk to pay them any heed. Anyone sober would just assume they were two drunks arguing, and move away.

"Then don't *make* it my business. Concentrate on your own mission, Spooky E."

Spooky E's face twisted with hatred, but then he snorted.

"I could say the same. What's with those five brats? Are those the targets you're monitoring? Are they even worth calling MPLS? A bunch of useless dropouts?"

Tenjiki Yuu remained unresponsive.

"Seems like you're just doing whatever *you* want, too. Eh? How long's it been since you sent Axis a report?"

Again, Tenjiki Yuu refused to respond.

"If those brats are MPLS, you sure have let them remain free a while." He paused. "What are you even doing? Let's be clear. You're the one in deep shit if upstairs finds out." He waited for a reply, and continued when none came. "Look, let's make a deal. I can help you out," Spooky E said, the grin back on his face. "You onto something here? Something big enough you won't have to be at the Towa Organization's beck and call?"

"Spooky Electric," Tenjiki Yuu said, in quiet but firm tones. "You are class C, and I am B. If you interfere with my actions in any way, I have the right to dispose of you. Are we clear?"

"Big talk."

“Or do you want to fight? A specialist-ability type against a combat-focus model? Do you really think you have a chance against me head-on, even if you catch me off guard?”

Spooky E’s smile didn’t fade, even in the face of a clear threat.

“Okay, okay, have it your way. But if you need help, just say the word.”

“Leave.”

“Got it. But Eugene...you better be careful. Word has it you know what’s lurking in this town.”

“What?”

“‘Boogiepop.’ He’s around here, somewhere!”

He chuckled. He was clearly joking. But if Spooky E had known he would lose an ear to ‘him’ later, he would not have laughed.

Tenjiki Yuu said nothing for a moment, then finally replied, “Never thought you’d believe in urban legends.”

He, too, knew not what fate had in store for him, but the wheels of that fate were already churning.

“An urban legend? You’re not wrong. But that name’s mixed up with a number of unexplained mission failures. That much is true. Hehehehe.”

No, at this point, Spooky E did not believe the stories, either. He was just mocking Tenjiki Yuu.

Tenjiki Yuu did not take the bait.

Spooky E put his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“You’d better watch out, Eugene.”

And then he left, guffawing.

Tenjiki Yuu let his head droop.

Fate...

His friends might be able to see the future, but they couldn’t see fate. Fate was not a point that lay in the future, but the path that led them there. No

matter what powers one had, there was no way to stop the wheels of fate from spinning.

The loudspeakers echoed through the station. “Train approaching. Remain behind the yellow lines.” An express train thundered through.

When the train was gone, there was no trace of Tenjiki Yuu.

“Lucky find,” Mikage Kasumi said, staring at the abandoned bicycle.

“Mm?” The other five looked at him, baffled.

They were near the target construction site. They’d met up at seven that morning and found the location of the ‘deal’ by nine. The sign said “Moon Temple Construction Site.” Must be the name of the building they were putting up.

Work was suspended for the day and it was dead quiet. No signs of anyone but the six of them.

“What? What about that bike?” Koumoto Kouji asked, but Kasumi ignored him, fiddling with the bike’s mirror.

The bicycle was a rusted mess. The chain was broken and the basket filled with cans tossed into it by passers-by. Odds were it had been stolen and abandoned here.

Kasumi was adjusting the bike’s half-broken rusty mirror.

“Hey, Kasumi-kun,” Nanane Kyoko said, stepping closer and tapping him on the shoulder.

“Seven of them,” Kasumi said.

“Huh?”

“Seven, three of them foreigners.”

“Oh,” Tsuji Nozomi got it first. “You see them in that mirror?”

“Mm?” Nanane Kyoko took a good look at Kasumi’s face. When he was using his talent, his eyes always took on a haunted look.

“You can do that? Not just in people’s eyes?”

Everyone was surprised by this.

Kasumi just kept on talking. “Don’t seem like yakuza. More like academics? The foreigners are wearing long coats, but I dunno where they’re from. The Japanese-looking ones are all wearing suits.”

He clicked his tongue, annoyed.

“It’s too far away to see any more details.”

“About where are they standing?”

Nozomi opened her sketchbook, glancing in the direction the mirror was reflecting.

“No, don’t draw anything this time,” Koumoto said, grabbing her hand.

“Why not?”

“Too dangerous. And Mikage said he couldn’t make out much. Better to not have any evidence on us.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” Tenjiki Yuu said.

Nozomi looked at him. “You think?” she asked.

But Mitsuo answered instead. “I do.” He nodded.

Nozomi glanced down at her page in silence.

“Anything coming to you? Automatic ready to activate?” Nanane asked.

Nozomi jumped and then shook her head. “N-no,” she said, and closed the sketchbook.

Meanwhile, Kasumi had set out on his own, headed for the spot he’d seen in the mirror.

Everyone hurried after him.

“Y-yo, dial it back a bit, Mikage.”

“Don’t worry, the sky looked nothing like it does now. It’s at least a few hours away,” Kasumi said, irritated.

Then he stopped, and looked around. They were a fair distance from the construction site itself, in an area where building materials were kept. Piles of girders were stacked everywhere. Excavators parked nearby.

Kasumi was absorbing everything, his eyes like daggers.

“But what exactly is the plan here?” Mitsuo said, speaking for everyone. “Sure we shouldn’t just call the cops?”

“Yeah, we’ll do that. Once we’ve destroyed all the drugs. Ain’t gonna let those dirty cops sell this shit on the side!” Voicing his deep-seated distrust of authorities, Kasumi began scrambling up the pile of girders.

“But...we’re just a bunch of kids! Can we actually do this?” Nanane said, anxious.

“I’m grateful you came this far with me,” Kasumi said. He kept moving about, not explaining his actions at all.

“What are you looking for?” Koumoto asked.

When there was no answer, Tenjiki Yuu said, “Kasumi-kun, those girders won’t work. If you’re doing this, use the excavators. Dig out the dirt underneath and you can knock them over easily.”

“Yeah?” Kasumi said, looking at him. “Can’t tip this pile?”

“Hard to time it right.”

The others had no idea what they were talking about.

“What do you mean?” Nozomi asked. “Knocking things over? Tipping piles? You don’t mean...”

She’d figured it out.

“You’re gonna knock it over on them?”

“What?!” Koumoto gasped. “Like, dump a pile of girders or an excavator on them? You do that, you could seriously kill them!”

“Who cares? They deserve it,” Kasumi said.

He had a lot of residual guilt over letting his friend get addicted to drugs. That had led to this deep well of anger, along with a near-suicidal desire to punish

himself.

But the others didn't know that.

"That's not the point! There's no reason for the two of you to become murderers!"

"Doesn't matter what happens to me."

"Say what?"

"Don't worry, we'll do it right," Tenjiki Yuu said. "We know exactly where they'll be standing. We can pin them down without killing them. And then let the police have them."

"That sounds better, but can you really pull it off?"

"That's what we're looking into. Right, Kasumi-kun?"

Kasumi said nothing. He clearly didn't care if they died or not.

Or what happened to him afterward.

"Now, as for the direction..."

Tenjiki Yuu went right on with the work, totally unbothered by Kasumi's behavior.

At last, Nanane said, "I wanna help. What should I do?"

That turned the tide and the others began helping Kasumi and Yuu.

The six of them always worked together.

Go-gon...

The skies grew darker quickly and rain began pelting down.

"Can't remember the last time it rained this hard."

"Where'd it even come from?"

The men standing in an empty yard away from the construction site glared at the skies, annoyed.

There were seven of them. Four Japanese, three foreigners. Each group facing

the other at a distance.

...Go-gon...

The rumble of a shaft being drilled nearby.

“You got what it takes to pay for this volume?” one of the Japanese men asked the foreign group.

“Of course,” the foreigner said, in fluent Japanese.

...Go-gon...

He opened the case in his hands. But there was no money inside. There were just a few thin black chips.

And yet, the recipients looked very pleased to see them.

“Amazing! How’d you get your hands on those?” one of the Japanese men asked. He wore silver-rimmed spectacles.

All of the Japanese men looked like they worked in or around research and development at some conglomerate—they were just salarymen. The black chips weren’t much to look at, but they were so high-tech, they were worth more than any jewels.

“You sure you just want drugs for those?”

“Yeah. Drugs can be turned into money fast, anywhere in the world.”

“We can send you cash online anywhere in the world, too. There some reason you’re staying offline?”

“No questions. We’re here to do this deal, nothing more.”

This might be a criminal deal, but neither group looked shifty or aggressive. Both were simply here to do a job and were being professional about it. The foreigners, in particular, clearly viewed this as the mere means to an end.

The rain died down and eventually stopped.

“Fine. This is just business for us, too.”

The Japanese pulled their trunk forward and set it on the ground. They stepped back.

One of the foreigners stepped past the trunk and handed the package of black chips to the Japanese.

On his way back, he reached out to grab the trunk.

And then...

There was a horrible creak.

The man looked from the trunk handle towards the source of the sound.

His face froze.

The excavator parked nearby was tilting towards him—or more precisely, towards the trunk next to him.

He jumped back. A second later, the long arm of the excavator landed with a thud.

It scored a bull's-eye on the trunk, squashing it flat between the ground and the metal arm.

"Tch." He tried pulling the trunk out, but the arm was too heavy and it didn't move.

"What the hell?!" The foreigners pulled out guns, pointing them at the Japanese.

"W-we don't know!" the Japanese said, shaking their heads. But this was far too much of a coincidence. Common sense said the excavator toppled because someone had dug out the area under it, and only the Japanese could have placed the trunk precisely where it would land.

The foreigners began to fire.

The Japanese fled.

But as they fled, they kept a tight grip on the case with the black chips inside.

They made a sharp turn at the pile of girders, using them as a shield.

"They started shooting!" Nanane Kyoko squeaked, tugging Kasumi's sleeve. They were watching from the shadows.

“I know!” he said, and pulled hard on the wire in his hand.

The pile of girders collapsed in front of the fleeing men, just as planned.

“Ah!” they yelled and changed course.

But as they ran across the tarp on the ground nearby, the ground collapsed under them.

A pitfall.

They’d fallen right into the most basic type of trap you could make.

The pile of girders rolled across the top, sealing them in the pit with no way out.

There was a clanking sound as the trapped men pounded on the girders, but there was no way they could lift those by hand.

The foreigners watched in shock.

A perfect trap. One sprung on both parties.

“Did this leak, somehow?” They shouted, but not in Japanese. “Is this the Towa Organization?”

They turned and ran.

Girders collapsed in front of them, but they ran right under, not trying to dodge. The pile had collapsed a little too late.

Koumoto, Mitsuo, and Nozomi were hiding in the shadows. When they saw the girders miss, they yelled in dismay.

“Oh no! Too late!”

“Crap, they’re getting away!”

“Shit, Tenjiki’s all alone out there!”

Of course, Tenjiki Yuu had let the girders fall a moment too late on purpose, to let the men get away.

He had deliberately led them to where he stood alone.

He moved quickly and without a sound, blocking their path.

“Wh-who the hell are you?!” they shouted, not in Japanese.

And Tenjiki spoke back, in that same language.

“Now that I know you’re enemies of the Towa Organization, I can’t let you leave.”

“Wh-what?”

The quiet-looking boy’s words caught them off guard.

In a fraction of a second, Tenjiki was on top of his first victim. Moving inhumanly fast, the tips of his fingers stabbed the man in the throat.

They went in deep, all the way to the root of the finger.

“—?!”

The other two didn’t even have time to be surprised. Tenjiki pulled his fingers out. Somehow, there was not so much as a drop of blood on them. Instead, there was a faint purple glow and some sort of liquid coated them.

“When this liquid gets inside you, it’s absorbed rapidly into the bloodstream, spreading through your body... causing a chemical reaction. A moment later...” he whispered.

There was a dull-sounding bang and the man he’d stabbed exploded.

Vanished without a trace.

Bits of his clothes, pulverized to millimeter-sized fragments, fluttered through the air, but the burst of high-temperature fire soon took care of them.

“Eee!” one of the others started to scream, but Tenjiki was already on him and a moment later he was vaporized.

Assassination without a trace.

This was the true purpose of Tenjiki Yuu—the synthetic human, Eugene—and his real power.

The last man didn’t even try to run. Tenjiki didn’t give him a chance.

Before he knew it, he was dangling in the air, Tenjiki’s hands around his

throat, wondering how this skinny kid could be so strong.

“.....gah...”

The hand on his throat was too tight for him to speak.

“I have a single question for you,” Tenjiki hissed. “Is the Towa Organization after you?”

A strange question. If these men were the Towa Organization’s enemies, then they were his enemies. But the way Tenjiki Yuu phrased it, it sounded as if he had no ties to the Towa Organization himself. It was as though he had no interest in who this man was, as if he had no intention of getting involved in whatever they were doing.

Terrified, the man just made a few strangled noises.

“I see. So if I don’t eliminate you, other Towa Organization members will come here to investigate. Then...” Tenjiki released him, and turned away. “You’re gone.”

Before the man hit the ground, he’d ceased to exist.

“Tenjiki-kun!” Nanane Kyoko got there first.

She found Tenjiki Yuu standing, staring into the distance.

“Sorry,” he said. “They got away.”

“Oh... but you’re safe! And we did what we set out to do.”

She came closer, then...

“...Hmm?”

She frowned. There was a strange smell in the air. Not a future smell, one actually present.

It was oily, like grease, or... it reminded her of something, but she couldn’t quite place it.

What...?

But the smell faded quickly, and was gone.

It smelled like animal or human body odor, but much fainter. It was extremely familiar, but impossible to pin down.

Kasumi caught up. “Tenjiki, is this...?” he asked, and knelt down to pick a black object off the ground.

“Beats me,” Tenjiki said, shaking his head. What Kasumi had picked up was a gun the men had left behind. Complete with a holster and extra rounds.

“We need to th-throw it away!” Nanane said. But Kasumi only stared down at it, making no move to get rid of the gun.

The other three caught up.

“Yo, hurry! The construction workers have noticed the commotion!”

Kasumi stood up, shoving the gun in his pocket.

Nanane looked really worried, but decided not to argue about it now.

They poured gasoline on the trunk trapped under the excavator and set it on fire.

After that, they left a note on the girders trapping the Japanese men that read, “These men are drug dealers.”

Then they fled.

Behind them, they could hear people coming.

For a few weeks, nothing else of note happened. The six continued to meet up and hang out, the same as before.

“That couple are gonna get all electric soon,” Mitsuo said, out of nowhere.

“What?” Nanane asked, frowning. The two of them and Yuu had all showed up way earlier than the rest, and were killing time in a café across the street.

“Uh...you know, just a feeling.”

He was looking at a young couple, probably still in junior high.

“...it’s a real masterpiece. I’m sure you’ll love it, Orihata,” the boy said, chattering happily. The girl was much quieter, and merely nodded.

They projected a gentle aura.

“They look close. Seem like a cute couple.”

“I don’t mean they’re gonna fight or anything. Just... electric.”

“I never understand anything your talent produces,” Nanane sighed.

“Do you have to be so mean about it? You could be a little nicer.”

“Should I be a little more squish squish? That’s how you’d put it, right? Squish squish squiiiish!”

She wriggled her hands in the air like tentacles.

“You an octopus now?”

“Call me the horrible octopus lady!”

She bent over laughing. Mitsuo snorted, but couldn’t suppress a grin of his own.

Tenjiki Yuu smiled at their comedy routine. He had information on the girl they were talking about. He knew exactly what Mitsuo’s ‘electric’ prediction meant.

But he revealed nothing.

He said nothing about anything that didn’t directly relate to the six of them.

“Oh, Koumoto’s here,” Mitsuo said, looking out the window.

They rose to leave.

They passed the couple as they left, but Camille had not been told about the higher-tier Eugene, and never noticed they were there.

“Heeeey! Kasumi-kun! You’re even gloomier than last time!” Nanane called out.

“Shut up! It’s the same thing every time!”

“Oh, you were all in there?”

“What were you talking about?”

“Scary octopus monsters.”

“Let’s go.”

With all six assembled, they headed for the karaoke place in a crumbling mall, shooting the shit as they walked.

“Ugh, it’s getting cold! Is it winter already?” Mitsuo said, shivering. “Looks like it’s getting ready to snow, too.”

“Yeah, those clouds look ominous,” Koumoto said, staring up at the sky.

“I hate winter,” Nanane said. “After it snows, it’s like all smells are suddenly gone. Everything’s the same, all differences erased.”

“Yeah? Never noticed,” Kasumi said.

“Yeah, well. Boys are dumb like that,” Nanane scoffed.

“Fair enough,” Kasumi said, rolling with it.

Walking behind the three boys, Tsuji Nozomi said, with perfect timing, “The dumb one, the uptight one, and the easy-going one. All second-rate chocolate. One ‘dark’ but low percentage, the next with some cheap nuts for crunch, and the last filled with honey that’s far too sweet.”

It was rare for her to joke like this, so Nanane laughed out loud.

“Ah ha ha! Totally!”

“I dunno, sounds good to me,” Mitsuo said.

Both girls laughed even harder.

“I guess I don’t eat a lot of sweets,” Koumoto said, deliberately sounding extra uptight.

“So dumb...” Kasumi said, scowling. But the edges of his lips were turning up.

The six walked on.

Smiling faintly, Tenjiki Yuu followed at the rear, his fists clenched. He was thinking about the girl Mikage Kasumi had seen, and about the shinigami.

Boogiepop. What is he? I doubt he shows mercy to those he judges a threat. And...

That girl. The girl who would tell someone to kill her to obtain the world.

Tenjiki was certain—not that he knew directly, but he could tell from her face. She was like him.

But she'd been “created” somewhere else. She was a being who should not exist.

His fists clenched tighter.

He was betraying a massive system that had influence all over the world.

That was fine. The stigma of treason and the risk it incurred were both things he accepted. Death itself did not bother him at all.

But he was scared.

He had the power to kill people instantly, and a body that could survive for months on nothing more than water, and yet, he was more scared than he'd ever been before.

His friends... the one source of warmth an artificial being like him had ever found, or would ever find.

He had to protect them.

But what if he had to reveal his true nature to them in order to protect them?

What if they figured out the truth using their abilities?

That was what really scared him.

“Mm? Tenjiki, what's wrong?” Mitsuo said, looking back at him.

“Huh?”

“You looked white as a sheet. You feeling okay?”

His friends often called Mitsuo simple-minded or a slacker, but he was always the first to notice if someone was feeling depressed or out of sorts, and the first to say something about it.

The others were all staring at him now.

Yuu fought back tears and forced a smile.

“N-nothing! I'm fine.”

“If you say so...”

“Tenjiki-kun, you’re so delicate! You have to take care of yourself!” Nanane said.

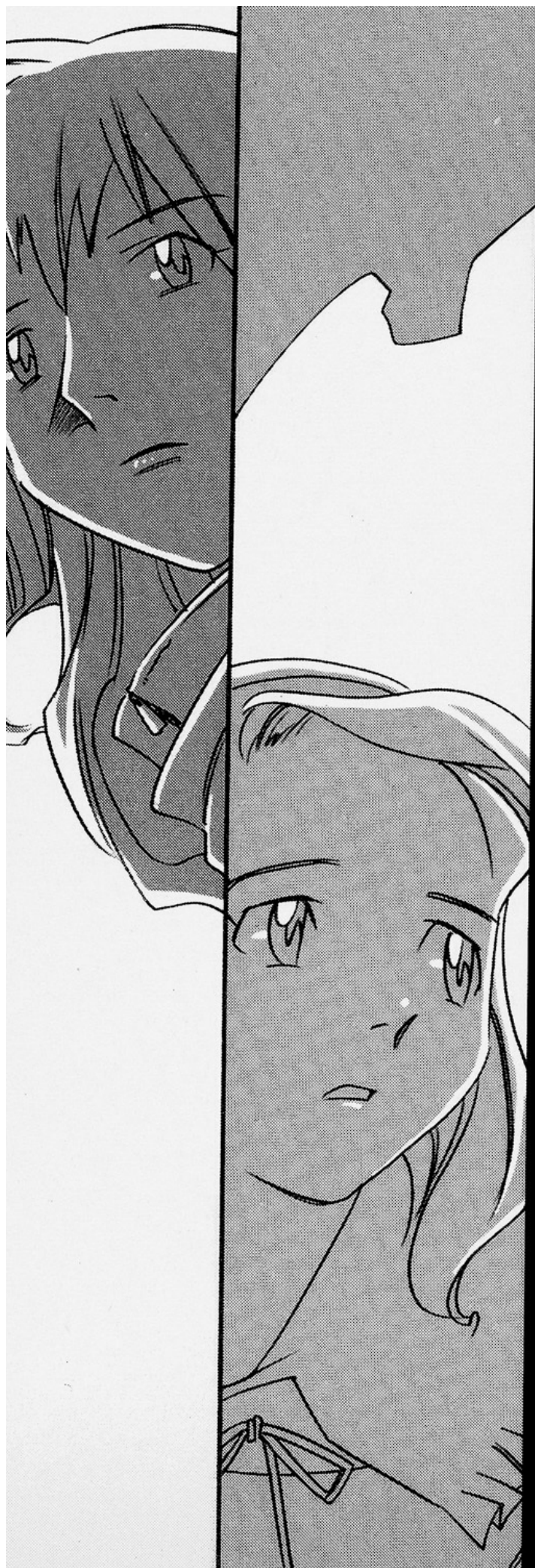
“The polar opposite of you,” Kasumi snorted.

“You’re so mean!”

Everyone laughed. Yuu laughed, too.

While he laughed, he felt a tear slide down his cheek.

It was winter. It looked ready to snow that evening.



5 Heart of the World

Heart of the World

A little while after sunset, white stuff started drifting down from the sky.

“I suspected it was cold enough. And here it is.”

Kentaro took his hands out of his pockets and warmed them with the white puff of his breath. The wind was coming from the sea, and the chill of moisture made it feel even colder.

He was in an open area of the harbor development zone; basic construction had been completed long ago, but no work had been done since. It was more or less abandoned. Once construction wrapped up in other areas, people would likely come back, but for now it was deserted. Beneath them was a labyrinth of underground paths and pipes for cable lines crisscrossing the area, but those were sealed off for the time being.

In one corner of the area stood a nondescript prefab building. It would one day be used as an office for the construction foreman, or a break room for the workers.

It should have been empty—yet all the curtains were pulled tight.

Only a little light seeped around them.

“See? There, Nagi.”

Kentaro spoke to the woman next to him, pointing at the building.

She was wearing a leather jumpsuit and steel-toed boots that could withstand several tons being dropped on them. These were appropriate for a construction site, but not for someone who was, at a glance, a classic serene beauty.

This woman was still young. Kentaro was seventeen, and she was roughly the same age, so perhaps ‘girl’ would be more apt. But there was a glint in her eye that made one hesitate to call her that.

Her name was Kirima Nagi.

At school, they called her The Fire Witch.

“Foreigners living in there are handing drugs over to junior high school kids, making bank. New shit I’ve never heard of, so it’s not even illegal yet. Law can’t do a thing.”

“Right,” she said.

“They don’t wanna cross the yakuza, so they’re only working with kids... Wasn’t easy tracking them down. Kids these days really won’t talk to anyone older.”

“Well done. Thanks, Kentaro. You can go now,” she said.

“Huh?” Kentaro blinked at her.

“I’ll handle it from here,” she said, in a tone that brooked no argument.

“Yo, Nagi! You can’t say that now! Haven’t I been helpful?”

“I appreciate the thought.”

“Don’t be like that! I owe you big time, Nagi. I’m yours to use,” Kentaro said, a note of desperation in his voice. “If you hadn’t saved me, I’d be in juvie or a mental hospital by now.”

“You’ve paid me back. No need to put yourself in danger.”

“Argh...” His shoulders slumped. “I get it. You don’t think I’m worth keeping around.”

“No... I think you’re a friend.”

“Then...!”

“And I won’t put my friends in danger. Never again.”

Nagi grit her teeth.

“Naoko was the last one,” she whispered. So softly Kentaro didn’t hear her.

The snow was starting to stick.

Kit sat in a darkened corner, eating the food she’d been given—an onigiri stuffed with canned tuna—keeping an eye on the group of men sitting in angry

silence around the table.

Before they'd brought her here, Kit had never eaten this weird ball of rice wrapped in dry seaweed, but she'd gotten used to it. Now she actually quite liked it. But she didn't tell them that.

When she was finished eating, she carefully removed all scraps of seaweed from her hands and began brushing her long black hair.

She couldn't move around the room. There were cuffs on her feet, connected to the exposed iron girders on the walls of the prefab room.

The men, like her, were eating junk food from the convenience store. Unlike her, they weren't exactly staying calm. Their mounting frustration was making a mess of the meal.

"God damn it, what's going on?" one shouted, unable to bear it any longer. "It's been a month since Cavs and them left! What the hell is taking them so long?"

"Shut up!"

"You know I'm right! They said they had Japanese industry ties that could score us a windfall! We even forked over the top secret chips!"

"Course they did," the eldest of them said. He had only one eye. "Those chips aren't even finished, barely anything set on 'em. Only the Japanese would buy those. And we can't leave here without money, or something we can turn into money. And we can't sell her here."

"Damn it. What's with this lousy country anyway? How come they're willing to buy high tech shit but not a weapon?"

He hit the table so hard the vibrations reached Kit in the corner.

She did not react. She just kept combing her hair, as if being called a weapon did not bother her.

"But you're right. They should be back by now."

"The buyers being cautious?"

"Let's hope that's all it is."

“What’s your point?”

“We’re all thinking it! The Towa Organization already got to them!”

“Calm down,” the one-eyed man said.

“But...!”

“If they had, they’d be here already.”

The men all turned and looked at Kit.

But none of them spoke to her, or asked her opinion. It was as if she was just an object that happened to be there.

“If we could use her, we could get rid of them easily.”

“And this entire country along with them. And our lives.”

“Jesus. She’s worthless if we can’t sell her.”

“You need facilities on a Towa Organization scale to stabilize something like that.”

“God damn ‘Out of Standardized.’”

“Experiment response was F-, for Christ’s sake.”

They began talking about Kit, spitting jargon incomprehensible to anyone not in their line of work.

Kit did not respond, and kept working on her hair.

She understood their words. She could read and write their language, the language of this country, and every major language in the world.

She simply chose not to respond.

While brushing her hair, she stroked the gold headband holding it in place. The smooth surface of it comforted her.

“That looks nice, Kit. Makes you look like a princess wearing a crown!”

It was a cheap piece of plastic with paint on it, not even gold-plated, but a friend who no longer existed had told her that. That alone had been enough to make it her one and only treasure. To avoid the suspicion of any customs inspectors, the men had given her rich little girl clothes, but it was the crappy

hairband she valued.

She worked hard on her hair. To keep her hair as nice as the headband, she worked diligently, not putting too much force into it, but a lot of love.

Before she knew it, tears were rolling down her cheeks. She tried to forget the other children—her friends, the ones who died in the experiments—but they were on her mind again, and the memories brought forth tears.

But her tears didn't bother the men at all. They went back to their meal.

They were silently munching on the red bean buns they'd bought for dessert when something hit the thin walls of the prefab hut.

"——!"

The men tensed and stood up, grabbing the guns they kept close at hand.

All eyes fixed on the source of the noise, but not another sound came.

"Did the wind blow a rock at us?"

"Go check it out."

One man moved slowly over to the window and moved the curtain aside, making sure he wasn't visible from the outside.

He carefully side-eyed the world outside. For the first time, he noticed it was snowing. There was an empty sports drink can lying near the wall.

He opened the window carefully with the tips of his fingers, keeping himself hidden.

No response.

At last, the man poked his face out the window. He looked around, but there was no sign of anyone, or any living thing. There was enough snow on the ground that he could tell there were no footprints.

"Nothing?" another man said, coming over.

"Yeah, looks like the wind just blew this can over."

"Then shut the window, that draft is freezing."

"Yeah..."

The man reached to close the window...and another hand *reached down* and grabbed his arm.

It yanked him out the window.

“———?!”

A stun gun was pressed against the man, giving him a shock that shook his entire body. When he fell back to the snow-covered ground below, he was unconscious.

“What the—?!”

Other men moved to point their guns out the window.

As they did, something the size of a human head was flung in through it. The men pumped it full of lead.

It exploded, flinging the contents everywhere.

“Wh-what is this?!”

It was liquid.

It covered the men’s bodies and a chunk of the floor. Colorless, but salty—the object thrown in the window was a balloon filled with seawater.

The person on the roof threw something else into the room. The same electric rod that had knocked out the man outside.

Seven million volts coursed through the salt water, assaulting anything it had come in contact with.

“Unh!”

The men fell over.

At last, the hidden figure—Kirima Nagi—slipped into the room, passing through the window like a gymnast and landing upright on the floor.

She quickly gathered up the men’s guns and threw them out the window.

Naturally, she’d approached the building from the side opposite to the one she’d thrown the can at. That’s why there were no footprints. She’d known she had a better chance at pulling this off if they let their guard down once.

“Unh... wh-who are you?” said the one-eyed man, the only one still conscious.

He did not speak Japanese, but Nagi responded in his language. “Where’re the drugs you were slinging around?”

“What...? N-not the Towa Organization?”

“You fight whoever you want. But I’m not letting you bring innocents down with you.”

“Unh...” the man grimaced.

Nagi took stock of the room.

And her face froze.

She’d only just noticed Kit sitting manacled to the corner.

The girl was far enough away that she’d escaped the electricity entirely.

She was sitting quietly, staring up at Nagi.

“Wh-why is there a kid here...?” Nagi yelled, rattled. She saw the cuffs on the girl’s feet, and went red with anger. “H-how could you...? She’s a child!”

Nagi ran over to Kit, pulled out a wire and quickly picked the lock.

Kit just stared blankly at her.

“You’re okay. You’re okay, now.” Nagi nodded soothingly and reached out, but Kit flinched and pulled back.

Nagi frowned, angry again. Not at Kit, but at the men who had made her this untrusting.

Kit watched her closely.

Nagi searched her pockets, then took out a bandana and held it out to the girl. Her cheeks were dirty from crying.

“Wipe your eyes... You’re a cute kid, can’t have you looking like that.”

Kit didn’t take the bandana, so Nagi set it down next to her.

Then she stood up and swung around, bristling with fury.

“Explain this!” she said, her footsteps echoing. She grabbed the one-eyed

man's collar and yanked him upright.

"Uhh...hehehe..." he groaned, but managed a chuckle. "I-If you aren't the Towa Organization, then what's to worry?"

"What?"

Nagi frowned... and then her eyes went wide.

In the man's one eye, she'd seen a shadow moving behind her.

"—!"

She tossed the one-eyed man aside and ducked.

Something rocketed past where her head had been. If that had hit—well, she wouldn't have survived it.

The man behind her had been completely unconscious a second ago.

But...there was something strange about him.

There was no light in his eyes—as if no thoughts drove his actions—like the face of a puppet.

".....?!"

The doll gave Nagi no chance to be surprised. It came after her.

She countered and landed a kick to the gut.

But he just staggered backward a step, and then grabbed her leg, as if he felt no pain.

Wh-what the....?!

Nagi shuddered, but she couldn't afford to panic. Using her captured leg as an axis, she spun, kicking the man with her other leg in an attempt to break his neck.

The strength left his fingers, and she fell.

"Oof...!"

She hastily righted herself to find the other men standing up, one after the other. All behaving like puppets.

“I’ve been mixing a certain pharmaceutical into their food. I didn’t tell them, though.”

The one-eyed man grinned at her.

“A ‘pharmaceutical’?” Nagi took a step back. The puppets came after her, quickly closing the gap.

“Yes...a pharmaceutical that activates if they take damage beyond a certain threshold. It erases all conscious thought, but allows them to fight beyond the limits of their bodies. They’ll eliminate all hostiles...but only live another week. I always planned to make off with all the profits, you see.”

The one-eyed man backed away from Nagi.

“It sure came in handy! I’ll leave you to them.”

“—!”

Nagi looked at Kit. The girl was still sitting there, unresponsive.

The one-eyed man lunged and tried to grab Kit’s arm.

Nagi moved like lightning, and threw a knife she had hidden in her steel-toed boots.

Her aim was true, and it stabbed the one-eyed man in the arm.

“Ahhh!”

“Run! Now!” Nagi yelled at Kit.

The girl froze a second, but then stood up. She gripped the bandana Nagi gave her tightly in her hands.

“Go! Get out of here!” Nagi yelled, fending off blows from the puppets—unarmed, as she’d just thrown her only weapon.

Kit ran like she’d been shot from a gun, out the door of the prefab hut and across the snow.

“W-wait!” the one-eyed man yelped and tried to follow, but the knife Nagi had thrown at him was connected to her by a wire. When he moved, it tugged on the knife and he let out a scream of pain.

Kit heard the scream behind her as she ran across the snow, into the night.

Tenjiki Yuu had long wondered if the gang's 'predictions' were abilities that showed them the future as it would unfold, or created a possible future that they could bring to pass. But no answer had ever come to him.

Either way, it was dark out when they left the karaoke joint, and snow was falling from the sky.

"Oh, I knew it! Snow!" Mitsuo said, happily.

"Someone's excited. What's the big deal?" Nanane grumped. She hated snow.

"Well, you know, I'm a big dumb kid, right? I wanna run around the garden like a puppy."

He actually did run a few steps forward and spin back to face them. For a moment he looked like Gene Kelly, so Kasumi whistled.

"Pretty good, Mitsuo!"

"From now on, call me the Dance King. Or maybe just Prince?" He said it with such a straight face that the others all broke out laughing.

"Anyone else hungry? Wanna grab some food?" Nanane said, clearly in a better mood.

"Yeah...not a bad idea. Who's in?" Koumoto asked.

Everyone nodded.

"Sure. Something warm! Somewhere with a grill on the counter."

"Perfect!" Nozomi nodded. "Kasumi-kun can be our younger kouhai."

Everyone but Kasumi laughed. He scowled. But he was the only one wearing a school uniform; anyone could tell he was a high school student.

"We can tell them I'm cosplaying," he said. Then he let it slip. "Besides, if they ask to see my school ID, I don't have one. They expelled me months ago."

They'd agreed to keep their personal lives a secret, but for a moment, he forgot.

Nanane gaped at him. Kasumi caught his mistake, but decided not to care.

“Whatever, it’s the truth,” he said, shrugging.

“O-okay,” Mitsuo said, awkwardly.

“What’d you do?” Nanane asked.

“Nanane!” Koumoto snapped. “Do you really need to know?”

She gasped. “S-sorry,” she said.

“No big deal,” Kasumi said. “C’mon, let’s get going. It’s cold as shit out here.”

“Yes, good idea!” Yuu chimed in. He’d been watching quietly, and picked the right moment to get everyone to agree.

“Yeah, let’s go, let’s go!” Mitsuo cried, and started leading the way.

Everyone else followed.

Nanane Kyoko followed at the rear, looking deflated.

Arghh...why am I always so tactless?

Lost in her thoughts, she failed to notice the shadow running out of an alley until she bumped into it.

“Whoa! S-sorry...”

She turned to look, but there was no one there. Or so she thought, but the person she’d bumped into was so short she was looking right over her head.

There was a little girl sitting on the ground at her feet.

“W-wow, I’m so... Wait, you’re...”

Nanane had seen this girl’s black hair and gold hairband before.

Kit had run with all her might as far as she could. By the time she got to town, she was so exhausted she’d run straight into some woman. She glanced up at Nanane, then scrambled to her feet and tried to run away again.

But someone grabbed her shoulder.

“Hang on there,” he said.

The boy next to Nanane took a close look at Kit's face, then called after the others.

"Yo, Mikage!"

"Huh? What, Koumoto?"

"Isn't this the kid? From before?"

He spoke like he knew Kit from somewhere.

Kit jumped, and pulled herself free—Kouji wasn't exactly holding her tight. She started running again.

"H-hey!" She heard shouting behind her, but ran as fast as she could.

But she was already out of breath, and running wasn't helping.

I-I have to run...

The nice woman who'd given her the bandana had said to run. So she ran. But how far...?

Gotta run...

She didn't even notice when she started to sway. She was barely staying on her feet.

Have to...run...

The lights of the city were starting to blur. Her field of vision narrowed. Her head was throbbing and she couldn't think straight. Her brain wasn't getting enough oxygen.

Just...run...

Cutting through a back alley, she slipped and fell. She didn't even realize that she'd tripped; she was too tired to move anymore.

Snow began to pile up on her tiny shoulders.

"You shouldn't have been so rough with her, Kouji-kun!" Nanane Kyoko yelled, running.

"It's not my fault! I just put my hand on her shoulder!" Koumoto Kouji didn't

sound too sure.

“Shit, where’d she go? She just turned this corner!”

“Yo, what’s going on?” Mitsuo said, totally out of it. Koumoto and Nanane ignored him, chasing after the girl.

“No good reason a girl that young is out this late at night—there’s gotta be something going on!”

They rounded the alley corner and saw something lying on the ground, covered in a thin layer of snow.

Nanane screamed, “Ahhh! Wh-what the?!”

“S-shit,” Koumoto ran over, and picked the girl up. He brushed the snow off her, and patted her face. She didn’t respond. Her breathing was so ragged it shook her entire body.

He touched her cheek.

“She’s burning up...”

“Is she okay?”

Nanane leaned in, worried.

“I don’t think so... maybe we should take her to a doctor,” he said.

The girl’s lips moved, as if she were saying something.

They couldn’t quite make it out, but Koumoto and Nanane glanced at each other.

“That wasn’t...”

“Yeah, definitely not Japanese. So she isn’t, either?”

“Th-then if we take her to a doctor, they’ll...”

“She’ll be treated like an illegal immigrant. What now?”

Koumoto took his coat off and wrapped the girl in it.

“At the least, we’ve got to get her somewhere where she can rest. The hospitals aren’t gonna be open at this hour, anyway. Don’t know that the ER would take her...”

Nanane winced, then said, “I know where. There’s a place close by.”

“What? Where?”

“There’s a place nearby that rents by the week.”

“They aren’t gonna rent a room out this time of night, though.”

Nanane pulled a key out of her pocket.

“Good thing I’m already renting one.”

“Uh...”

“That’s where I live... for the next month, anyway. I’m a runaway,” she said, trying to make it sound matter-of-fact. But she was white as a sheet. Her face was painted with stress.

Koumoto took the key, unsure of what to say.

“Not...a new thing. It’s been like this all along.”

“Nanane, I...”

“I lied, okay? Sorry.”

The other four caught up to them.

“Yo, what’s going on...? Oh.” Mitsuo saw the girl.

“Th-that’s...?!” Nozomi said, surprised.

“Talk later,” Koumoto said. “First, we gotta get her somewhere warm.”

When he said where, Kasumi looked surprised.

“Why a place like that?”

Nanane flinched. “Um,” she started.

But Koumoto interrupted.

“I’ve been keeping a room there in case something like this happened,” he said. Then he turned to Nanane. “Remember where it is? Can you make sure everyone gets there?”

“Um... y-yeah, sure,” she nodded.

It was a studio that included an eight-mat room, as well as a kitchen and a bath. It was on the sixth floor, with a nice view from the window, but none of them were appreciating that at the moment.

Nozomi laid a damp towel on the girl's forehead.

The girl's breathing was starting to look better, at last. She was breathing normally now, sound asleep.

"Thank goodness... if she'd stayed out in the cold any longer, she'd have caught pneumonia."

"Jesus," Koumoto said, with a sigh of relief.

The two of them were alone in the room. The other four were out getting supplies.

"This...is the girl, right?"

"Yeah... The one Kasumi predicted."

"What's going on?"

"Don't ask me! But it looks like fate brought us together."

"Fate..." Nozomi sighed. "Can't believe you're saying that. I thought you hated that stuff! You're not like your parents."

"Well..." Koumoto tried to argue, but the words didn't come.

Nozomi changed the subject. "This is Kyoko's room, right?"

"Yeah."

Koumoto owned up to it. Nozomi already knew he wasn't renting any rooms. And he knew she knew.

"So she *is* a runaway?"

"You knew?"

"I had an idea."

"Woman are scary..." Koumoto grinned.

"She didn't want Mikage-kun knowing?"

“Didn’t look like it. Whatever she says, she’s clearly serious about him... She’s gonna have to tell him eventually. If she really loves him, she needs to. I’ll cover for her this time, but...”

“Yeah.”

Nozomi nodded. As composed as ever.

The other four returned.

They’d bought a grapefruit-flavored sports drink, hoping it would help restore the girl. They put the straw into the sleeping child’s mouth and tipped a little in. She swallowed.

“Looks like we won’t need a hospital,” Kasumi nodded.

Mitsuo patted his chest, looking genuinely relieved. “Whew,” he said.

This was enough to break through Nanane’s stress, and she laughed, looking like herself again.

They all spent the night in that room. Only Mitsuo lived with his parents, so only he had to call and argue about it. They took turns watching over her.

None of them knew it, but right now, they were the heart of the world.

Their actions would determine the very fate of the planet. If they had been the kind of kids who’d abandon a feeble child to the elements, then everything would have ended there.

Making sure the others were asleep, Tenjiki Yuu stood next to the girl.

Expressionless, he watched her sleep, and not like one would watch a child.

Suddenly he leaned in, and put his lips on hers. Not just his lips—he stuck his tongue in her mouth, moving it around.

The sleeping girl’s body was producing saliva, and Tenjiki Yuu flicked his tongue to catch it, tasting it. The data in that flavor told him its composition.

“—!”

His expression changed.

He went white as a sheet.

He slowly rose to his feet and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

“They knew... and still made you?” he whispered. “No, that can’t be true. They had no idea what they were making. They still don’t know how powerful you are.”

His voice was tight, as though he wasn’t thinking out loud so much as describing something unbelievable.

“That’s...one heck of a failure. And one heck of a package.”

His teeth were rattling. He couldn’t make them stop.

He’d never been this scared before.

6

KOUMOTO KOUJI
Whispering



Koumoto Kouji - Whispering

*“**Y**ou will be our savior.”*

“The future of the world is in your hands, Kouji-san.”

I, Koumoto Kouji, was raised listening to words like these, words that hardly seem real. My parents were priests in a cult. They expected me to succeed them. I grew up seeing what lay behind the scenes of these ‘miracles’ and ‘oracles.’ It happened too often to count. I knew my parents were just using their ‘believers.’

I thought that was normal. That was how the world worked. Salvation and destiny were frauds, with no substance to back either one up. It was all a lie even a child my age could see through, made for people who clung desperately to them anyway.

But everything changed when I was ten, and discovered my own power.

Fortunately, I discovered it somewhere totally unconnected to my parents.

We were on a school trip, and I was lost in the mountains with a girl from my class, Tsuji Nozomi. That’s when my power first activated. Nozomi told me afterward that I suddenly started speaking in our teacher’s voice, saying, “If they had gone west, instead, they might have fallen off that cliff...”

I didn’t quite believe her, but using the sun as a guide, we headed east...and were rescued.

No matter how I looked at it, it was a miracle. But I never once considered telling my parents. I asked Nozomi not to tell anyone, either. She laughed like I was an idiot, and in her usual ultra-calm voice, said, “You’re not the only one, Kouji. I can do the same thing.”

And so we became a secret pair. A few years later, in junior high, I began saying things my parents and their cult viewed as blasphemy, and got myself excommunicated and exiled.

Deliberately.

Ever since, a group of people who had their families stolen away by the same cult have been supporting me financially, helping me find places to live and part-time work. Some of them took their anger at my parents' actions out on me, but I just apologize like I mean it (I do mean it) and they don't push it further.

And now I'm one of a gang of six. I often wonder...

The miracles we produce are real, unlike those my parents claimed. But what of it?

In fact, the real reason I insist we don't talk about ourselves is because I don't want them knowing about me. If I were still in that cult, my power could be used to control the believers even more effectively.

And what if one of the six was into that sort of thing?

I knew that wasn't likely. I do trust them now, but I had to be cautious early on.

I despise my parents and what they do, and that drives every decision I make. But...is that just because I see myself in them?

Like them, do I want to control and use people through lies or other means?

So I keep my background a secret from my friends. Not because I'm worried about them, but because I'm worried about myself.

I've told all this to Nozomi, who already knows all about me. But every time I talk about this with her, she just laughs. Always the rational one.

"You realize you're just being paranoid, right, Kouji?" she says.

It's always such a relief when she says that.

And I wonder... why is it that we've been given these miraculous powers?

Maybe...

And now, in a weekly apartment studio, with the morning sun shining in the window, I'm thinking about that again.

Maybe this girl is the key to it all.

A whole day had passed. We were on our second day watching over this girl as she slept.

I must have been muttering under my breath, because Mitsuo looked up. "Mm? Did you say something?" he asked.

"No, nothing," I shook my head. "I was just wondering where this girl came from."

"Oh, yeah... Good question. She could pass for Japanese, so she's probably some type of Asian."

"Wonder if she'll understand us."

"When she wakes up, we'll give her some food. That'll show we aren't out to get her."

He sounded so certain I couldn't help but laugh.

"Like a cat? I dunno if it'll be that easy."

The sound of our voices woke the others, and they started grumbling and stretching.

"My back is killing me," Nanane said, waving her long limbs around.

"Any change?" Kasumi asked.

I nodded. "She's better. Her fever broke at last."

"That's good," Nozomi said, leaning in close. She might seem standoffish, but underneath she cared. I bet she was more worried about the girl than any us.

"Argh, I'm starving. Anyone else hungry?" Nanane began rummaging through plastic bags, digging out the food we'd stocked up on last night. She started handing sandwiches and sausage rolls to everyone.

"Here, Tenjiki-kun. Canned tuna onigiri okay?"

Tenjiki ignored the offering, staring blankly at nothing. He was sitting in exactly the same position as when we'd all been sleeping.

"Tenjiki-kun?"

"You should give that to her," he said, softly.

“Huh?”

“She’s awake.”

We all looked at him, surprised, then looked at the girl on the bed.

Her eyes were still closed.

“She’s asleep!” Mitsuo said.

“No, she’s awake,” Tenjiki said. “Right? You can stop pretending.”

We all just looked at him, so he stood up, took the onigiri from Nanane, quickly took the wrapper off and held it under the girl’s nose.

Her eyes snapped open.

She stared up at Tenjiki.

“You wanted to know if we were enemies?” he asked. His tone was downright frosty.

She said nothing.

We all gaped, unable to grasp what was happening.

The girl didn’t move for a long moment, but at last she slowly sat up, took the onigiri from Tenjiki’s hand, and took a bite.

She must have been very hungry. She tore through the onigiri with a very childish focus. I was worried she might choke on it.

“Nanane-san,” Tenjiki said. “Something to drink.”

Nanane hurriedly poured some tea into a paper cup and handed it to the girl.

The girl drained it. Tenjiki smoothly handed her a second onigiri, and she ate some of that, then stopped and looked at me.

“Like a cat?” she said.

“Huh?” I blinked.

“Am I like a cat?” she asked. She’d been listening to me and Mitsuo talking? She’d been awake the whole time?

“Er, uh... not in like...a bad way?” I said, not sure how to respond. I tried

smiling. “What’s your name? I guess you understand us...”

“Kit. I understand.”

She turned back to the onigiri.

“Kit-chan, huh? Good name. Where’d you come from?”

She didn’t answer. Couldn’t blame her. I looked around at everyone, and nodded. Kasumi shrugged back.

“Want some of these?” Nanane asked, unwrapping some baby cheese and fish sausage. Kit accepted and ate both.

When she was finally full, she let out a long breath and asked, “What are you?”

““What?”” Mitsuo said, confused. “I dunno, what are we?”

“We ain’t nothing. Just normal teenagers,” Kasumi said.

He was right, sort of.

“What group do you belong to?”

This question baffled all of us.

“Uh... the six of us? We belong to our group?” Nanane said, puzzled.

Our gang had never really had a name.

There was no point in trying to explain our ‘talents’—she wouldn’t understand. Nobody would.

When we said nothing else, Kit suddenly smiled.

“You’re friends!”

Like that word was worth its weight in gold.

“Well, yeah,” I said, nodding. “Where are your friends?” I asked.

A shadow passed over her face. “They’re gone. They all died.”

“—!”

Shit, I thought.

When none of us said anything, Kit continued. “You should...abandon me. Or

give me to the Japanese government. If not the government, some other big group.”

“What? Why?”

I had no idea why she’d say something like that, but her answer was even more baffling. Looking deadly serious, this little kid actually said, “I’m a weapon of mass destruction. Keeping me will lead to your doom.”

A little earlier.

“God damn that Japanese bitch...!”

Under the starry sky, the one-eyed man was rebinding the tourniquet on his bleeding arm. He had run after Kit as best he could, but lost sight of her.

He hadn’t bothered going back to check what had happened to his assailant. That fight was a foregone conclusion. No mere mortal could go up against multiple drug-enhanced units unarmed. She’d have been torn to pieces. That thought was the only thing comforting the one-eyed man now.

“The problem is the little girl...”

She had nowhere to run to. She knew full well that if the Japanese government or some other group got a hold of her, they’d experiment on her, cut her open, and call it research.

“She must be hiding somewhere... but where? She doesn’t know her way around... it has to be somewhere obvious.”

Muttering to himself, the one-eyed man stumbled through the deserted nighttime streets.

In a bag under his arm, he had the money they’d scrounged up, some drugs he could barter with, and a pile of data discs. Even those could prove valuable to the right buyer. But nothing compared to the ‘ultimate weapon,’ Kit. The one-eyed man was not ready to give up on her. Not ever.

“Where is she? Where...?”

The snow died down in the small hours of the morning. It had melted away

and there was nothing left on the streets.

The few moments he'd let blood into his arm had warmed it up, but with the tourniquet back in place, it was going numb.

"Damn it! Where'd that little shit go?"

Angrily, he kicked a nearby garbage can.

There was a rustle behind him.

"Mm?"

He spun around. Nothing there.

But—it had sounded like surprise, a reaction to his sudden action. He'd sensed it.

He walked carefully toward the sound. When he reached the corner, he peeped around it.

The sound had come from a nearby alley filled only with rows of garbage cans. No one was in sight.

The one-eyed man picked up a pebble and flung it at a garbage can. There was a racket and a startled stray cat ran away.

"Christ, scared the crap out of me..." the one-eyed man spat. He turned to leave just as a metal bat came swinging right at him.

THUD.

It hit the back of his head with a dull sound. He was unconscious before he even registered what had happened to him.

"Thought so, he's one of them foreign bastards."

The bat belonged to a boy of around fourteen or fifteen. He kicked the fallen one-eyed man like you would a soccer ball.

"What's he got on him?"

The boy's friends—no, it was highly doubtful these were friends, but they were cut from the same cloth—filed out of the shadows.

All of them had been the one-eyed man's 'clients'—people his group sold drugs to.

What were they doing out this late at night? That was the wrong question. They were only ever out at this time of night. There were other groups that laid claim to daylight hours, to evenings, even to early mornings. If anyone else wandered out in 'their time' they'd attack like wild animals. So these boys had no choice but to be active during the wee hours of the night. It was a form of 'habitat isolation,' a behavior seen among animals in nature.

And the one-eyed man had entered 'their time.' He was the perfect target—a lone, suspicious foreign man in no shape to fight back.

"Shit, look at all this cash!"

"And drugs! That's what I'm talking about!"

They had his bag and were ransacking it.

"The heck is this? Computer shit?"

"I dunno, just smash it up!"

The discs filled with priceless data were thrown to the ground and stamped into pieces.

"Hehe, quite a score. Never even seen these drugs before. Bet they'll be mind-blowing!"

They laughed, and kicked the one-eyed man.

He wasn't moving. One of the boys grabbed his head and yanked it up, peering into his one good eye. It was clouded over, blood seeping out between the eye and the lid.

"Yo, this dude's croaked it."

"For real? Shiiit."

"Whatever, he's just some gangster. Leave his ass here and the pigs'll just assume he bit it in some turf war. Nobody gives a shit about foreigners anyway."

Everyone laughed.

They dragged the one-eyed man roughly across the alley and threw him in the pile of trash. They tossed more trash on top of him until his body was hidden from view. No one would come to collect the garbage for another two days, so the body would go undiscovered until then. It was winter, so it would take longer to start stinking.

“Mm?”

One of the boys pulled a photo out of the bag.

“What the heck is this?”

It was a picture of Kit, intended to be shown to potential buyers.

“What?”

The boys gathered around, staring at the picture.

“Why’s he got a pic of some kid?”

“Obvious, ain’t it?” another one laughed. “Dude’s a pedo! Or else he’s selling kids to ‘em, showing off his merchandise.”

“Heh, nasty!”

Having mistaken the picture for something sexualized, each of them took a good long look at Kit.

Then they scattered, each to their own hiding spots, and began shooting up on the drugs they’d looted.

Kit’s face would be the last thing they saw while they were sane—and the image of her stayed burned into their brains.

She was an enemy to be eliminated.

The girl who called herself Kit didn’t seem like anything but a cute, ordinary kid. But what she told us was beyond imagining.

“My parents sold me. We were poor; they had no choice. But I wasn’t sold to a factory, or to a pimp...or whatever. Nothing like that. I was taken deep into

the mountains, given a lot of shots, and had a lot of things done to my body.

“I don’t know what they did. I was asleep for most of it. I think they put me under. I would wake up and find bandages all over me. That was always really scary. It doesn’t seem so scary now. What’s really scary is that somewhere along the way, I stopped being human.

“One day they took me to a big room with no windows. The people who kept me there were wearing weird silver clothes that covered their entire bodies. They gave me some weird medicine. I drank it, and everyone quickly ran out of the room. Then they let a bunch of rats into the room. Hundreds of them. I was surprised, and tried to run away, but there was nowhere to run to, so I hid in a corner, terrified.

“But the mice all started foaming at the mouth. They all died. I didn’t know why, but...

“Eventually I figured out that I was poisoning them. Nearly all the rats were dead, and there were only a few left... I felt sorry for them, so I reached out... and when I touched them, they died. That’s how I knew.

“They’d changed me into something designed only to kill. I think if I drink that medicine, then everything living around me will die.”

She spoke without emotion.

We just gaped at her.

Our minds couldn’t begin to grasp the suffering and pain she’d endured. How must she have felt when she stretched out her hand, only to have it bring death? How could we understand?

She kept talking.

“The people who did things to me called me the ‘ultimate weapon.’ There was no defense against me, they said. The world would belong to whoever used me the right way. They don’t even need the medicine—all they have to do is kill me.

“So if you want the world, then you can have it if you kill me. It’s easy.

“But then—something happened. They took me away from the mountains

and brought me here. They said they were going to use me to make a deal. But a woman from this country came and saved me, and told me to run. But she's..."

For the first time, her voice shook. Like she was about to cry.

"Enough!" I said, not able to bear it any longer. "We get it."

I couldn't force her to tell us any more.

Kit had a bandana held tightly in her hand, and her shoulders were shaking.

"What do you think?" I whispered, looking at the others.

"I dunno," Nanane said, uncertain. "I don't know if I understand it, let alone believe it."

"But do you think she's lying?"

"No..."

"Can't see anyone feeding a kid a lie that convoluted, either," Kasumi said. He looked furious. As blunt as he could be, inside he was always fighting for what was right. He was clearly ready to bring hell down upon everyone who'd done this to Kit.

"That's...true enough," Nozomi agreed, choosing her words carefully.

"Hmm..." Mitsuo said, fidgeting.

"Forget whether we believe her or not. We need to decide what to do with her," I said, trying to move things along.

"I know," Nanane said, her head still reeling. "But she's so little... how could they do that to her?"

"Doesn't matter if she's little. Or that she's a child," Tenjiki said, out of nowhere. "You know that better than anyone, Nanane Kyoko-san."

Nanane let out a little gasp. Tenjiki could really hit where it hurt sometimes. He clearly knew she'd run away from home.

"We definitely can't take her to the cops. Kit doesn't have a passport or anything. They'll never believe her story. She'll be treated like a criminal." Even as I spoke, I felt like I was saying there was nothing we could do.

Everyone else thought the same thing. There was a long silence.

“But...” Kasumi said. He turned to Kit. “She told you to run?”

Kit nodded.

“Then there’s someone after you?”

We all gulped.

“I don’t know,” Kit said, shaking her head.

But Kasumi definitely had a point.

“Seems likely enough. What now?”

“We can’t let them have her,” Kasumi said.

“True,” Tenjiki nodded.

“Hmm,” Mitsuho said, still fidgeting. Wasn’t like him to think this hard about anything. Guess if there was ever a time for it, it was now.

“Then... then they really did all those awful things to her?” Nanane said, as if she still couldn’t believe it. Then she suddenly got really angry. “That’s not right!”

“Nobody said it was. Right?” Kasumi glared at the rest of us.

I nodded.

Then Kit spoke up, softly. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Huh?”

“It doesn’t matter what happens to me.”

She sounded utterly exhausted. All of us felt a hand clench our hearts. I suppose I can’t speak for the other five, but I’m sure they felt the same. No child should ever sound like an old woman on her deathbed.

“Don’t worry. We’ll save you,” Nozomi said, speaking for all of us.

Kit stared at the ground, not responding.

“Any ideas, Kit-chan?” Nanane asked.

She shook her head.

“Then what? We keep her hidden for now, and then...?”

I couldn’t make up my mind.

I did know a place. Somewhere that could keep her hidden. Kit didn’t seem like a part of our world, but I knew a place that was every bit as isolated: The ‘cult’ my parents ran. If she was there, she could hide from the rest of the world.

However, I really didn’t want to suggest that. I never wanted to have anything to do with them again. But if there was no other way...

“Um...” I started.

“I don’t think we’re ready to think about that yet,” Kasumi said. “We need to buy some time, see what happens... figure out if there actually is anyone after her or not. Then we move. Right, Koumoto?”

He looked at me. I blinked, and nodded.

“Can we use our ‘talents’ to check?” Nanane said, folding her arms. “Anyone got anything? Mitsuo-kun, even your vague ones.”

Mitsuo-kun didn’t answer. He still seemed really out of it.

Then there was a loud noise outside the room.

“—!”

We all tensed and stared at the door.

Silence. There was no further sound.

Kasumi moved quickly, and grabbed the intercom.

“Who are you calling?”

“The manager’s office... If there’s anything going on below, we’ll know.”

Kasumi put the phone to his ear and waited. Didn’t seem like anyone was answering.

“Shit, nothing...”

“Give me that!” I said, and reached out... and there was a click as someone picked up.

“H-help...! We’re being att—”

There was a scream, and then it cut out.

“Hello? Hello!” I called, but there was no answer.

“Wh-what’s going on?” Nozomi whispered, white as a sheet.

“Her pursuers are here. And they aren’t concerned about collateral damage,” Tenjiki said.

“But how did they find us?”

“Worry about that later. First, we have to get outta here.”

Wham. Thud. More loud noises. Something going on a floor below us.

Were they attacking everyone in the building? Who the hell were these people?!

“B-but if they’ve got the lower floors occupied...how can we get away?!” I said.

Tenjiki didn’t bat an eye. “There should be an emergency escape chute. We’ll go down through that.”

It felt like he’d done this before. Like he was an expert in this sort of thing.

There was another loud noise from the hall. Were they that close...?!

“Everyone down!” Tenjiki said, and went to the door alone.

We did as he said, crouching in the corner.

Nanane grabbed Kit and pulled her in close. Kit clung to her.

We could hear a crashing sound getting slowly closer.

“They’re here...!”

Tenjiki was opening and closing his hands. What was he doing?

We all held our breath, trying to ready ourselves for anything. That is, everybody except for Mitsuo. His gaze was wandering, his attention elsewhere.

“It’s like...” he said, totally relaxed. “You know, like...”

“What the hell are you going on about?” Kasumi snarled.

Mitsuo ignored him. “The ‘hot then cold’ thing... But I shouldn’t know that. When blood comes out, the blood itself is hot but the body loses heat and gets cold, right? But how would I know that after it happens?”

Total gibberish.

“Get a grip, man!” I said, and reached out to grab his shoulder.

But Mitsuo suddenly shoved Kasumi, hard.

Not just him; he also shoved Nanane and Kit away.

A moment later, it happened.

The door smashed in, and five or six figures entered. Tenjiki moved to intercept—and more enemies came smashing through the window.

Mitsuo was right in the way of their attack.

Their knives swept forward, striking across his chest and stomach. Even as they did, Mitsuo used his full weight to tackle them, hurling them bodily through the window.

“—?!”

And I noticed... even now, Mitsuo wasn’t here. His gaze was elsewhere, and he said, “Oh...I see. I get it now. That’s how I...”

And he tumbled out the window after them.

“M-Mitsuo-kun!” Nozomi shrieked.

Behind her, the men Tenjiki grappled with began exploding.

I had no idea how, but it was clearly something Tenjiki had done to them.

“Damn it!” Tenjiki spun around and dashed to the window.

We looked down at the ground six floors below, where Mitsuo and the men he’d pushed had fallen.

At their...flattened bodies.

“M-Mitsuo’s...” But I couldn’t say the rest.

“No one else coming this way,” Tenjiki said, looking up. “Hurry! That’s not the last of them.”

“B-b-b-but he’s dead? He’s dead?!” Nanane said, her teeth chattering.

“If Mitsuo-kun hadn’t protected you, we’d *all* be dead! Now move!” Tenjiki roared.

The first wave of panic left us, and the truth sank in.

Kazumiya Mitsuo was actually dead.

They were no longer human.

And they were multiplying.

Those who put that drug into their bodies were programmed to infect anyone like them—the groups of teens who ruled the other blocks of time. It wasn’t that hard to picture what happened. The other teams came out to find the ‘infected’ in their turf, and attacked. They were bitten and the fluid entered their bloodstream.

And then evolution happened, something even the drug’s inventors never anticipated. The infected minds began to resonate, like a hive of bees.

Some members of this hive mind were on the evening team. And a few of them had seen the six take Kit into the weekly apartment.

They’d been turned into wild things. And wild things are much smarter than humans often assume. Instincts honed over the course of thousands of years can be far more aggressive and accurate than the conscious human mind. And all animals, from the tiniest amoeba to the largest whale, share one instinct in particular.

Destroy all enemies.

People who think wild animals do not kill unless necessary are only seeing part of the picture. They don’t kill simply because they *can’t* kill more; but once seen as an enemy, animals—humans included—think nothing of wiping out an entire species.

And this instinct drove them.

Their instincts used ‘memories’ from when they’d been human. These told

them how to use weapons, how to attack in groups, how to attack from behind while drawing attention elsewhere—all pure animal instinct.

But their first attack failed.

The ‘enemy’ sacrificed one of their own to drive off their first wave and run for it.

They already occupied the entire weekly apartment building. They’d killed the managers and all the other residents. There should have been no way for them to escape, but the enemy had used the emergency access chute to get from the roof to the ground in moments. The last one disconnected the chute and simply jumped down, impossibly landing on his own two feet. They’d lost them there.

They stared in silence. They watched their enemy steal a small van parked near the landing site and flee without saying a word.

There was no need. They no longer had need of language.

‘Pursue the enemy, and end them.’

All other things had ceased to matter.

The van was restocking the convenience store, or maybe making a pickup. Either way, the driver had left the engine running and stepped away from the vehicle at just the right time for us to make off with it. I was in the driver’s seat. I had a driver’s license thanks to my job; a van this size was no problem for me.

“Hey! C-come back here!”

The driver came running out of the shop after us, but we were already burning rubber.

None of us said a word. None of us met each other’s eyes.

But there was definitely a tension between Tenjiki Yuu and the rest of us.

At last, he addressed it.

“I’m guessing you’ve already worked this out, but I’m not human. I’m man-made. I’m a combat weapon.”

He looked serious.

“Then, Stigma is...”

“That? I was just injuring myself. Making up likely-sounding words.”

We all let out a long breath.

“You were monitoring us?” Kasumi asked.

“You could say that.”

“Then you’ve messed up big time. You’re exposed.”

“The situation left me with no choice.”

“Yeah, but... does that mean we can still see you as a friend? That we can still trust you?”

Kasumi looked Tenjiki dead in the eyes. I watched through the rearview mirror.

“If you can, I’d be very glad if you did,” Tenjiki said, meeting his gaze.

“You told me once,” Nozomi said, softly. “It was all true, Tenjiki-kun...”

“Thanks for not telling the others.”

Before he finished, Nanane was asking the urgent question. “But what are they, Tenjiki-kun? You know what the hell those things attacking us are?”

“Yeah. They’re doped somehow. Former humans altered by chemicals. Nothing but fiends now. Their very brains are altered beyond any cure.”

“Chemicals? The same people that did all that awful stuff to Kit-chan?”

“Likely.”

“These things attacking on their orders?”

Tenjiki shook his head.

“That’s the problem. I assumed as much, but given how ruthless their assault was, it doesn’t fit. They’re clearly out to kill Kit. If someone was giving them orders, they’d never do that. My best guess is that the group that had Kit has been wiped out. Based on the number of doped fiends, however, they’re increasing in number like an epidemic.”

“Huh?”

“Either they were killed by the monsters they made, or there was some accident that left the drugs behind... I’m not sure which, but these doped fiends are clearly out of control. Nobody can stop them now. Their only drive is to find and kill their ‘enemy.’”

“Kit-chan?”

“No, all of us. We’ve all been marked by their instincts.”

“.....”

“The world is in danger,” Tenjiki said. “The fate of the world rests upon our shoulders.”

We all gaped at him.

“That’s the truth.” He turned and glared at the girl. “Kit, if you die now, the world will end.”

“I’ve already examined her body,” Tenjiki explained. “The results were horrifying.

“Kit’s ‘massacre power’ is the result of a bacteria living as a parasite in her body. The bacteria itself is harmless to her, and with a low propagation rate, not a concern as is. Unless she dies, at which point the bacteria will break up, leaving a portion of its DNA behind. While alive, this strand is constantly being broken down by the bacteria, rendering it harmless, but once that process stops, it becomes a deadly virus.

“This is Kit’s power. She has antibodies that keep her safe, but the virus is extremely deadly. The medicine she was given suppressed the bacteria, temporarily activating the virus.

“This much is what her creators planned. She’s a living biological weapon. If they were to take her to an urban center and cause an outbreak, it’d kill everyone in the area. Military invasions or missile launches can be stopped, but no country or city in the world can prevent a single human being from getting in. She was supposed to be the ultimate weapon, against which there was no defense.

“But they had no idea what would happen when Kit kills another human.

“The bacteria within her have mutated. There are changes to the DNA strand. When the virus infects other humans, it’ll begin to evolve... It’ll fuse with human DNA, creating a new lifeform. One adapted to human hosts. By adapting to Kit’s body, it’s becoming a disease perfectly attuned to human beings.

“There’s no telling what’ll happen as it evolves...but most likely, it’ll spread like wildfire, faster than human efforts to contain it. Faster than the plague or smallpox ever did. It could possibly wipe out the entire human race...

“If Kit dies, the bacteria die with her. And the virus alone will remain, spreading across the world.”

None of us could speak.

Kit herself looked terrified, her lips trembling.

Kasumi shook his head, trying to calm himself.

“W-wait, then if Kit ever dies, we’re done for?”

“Not indefinitely,” Tenjiki said.

“You mean...?”

“The danger will continue until Kit matures. If her body changes, the stabilized bacteria will be diminished, and eventually vanish for good. The virus will die along with them.”

“By ‘change’, you mean...? Seriously?” Nozomi asked.

Tenjiki nodded. “Exactly. Puberty. Once she gets her period, the danger is over.”

“You’re sure?”

“My analysis is correct. I’m sure of it. I’m a specialist in this type of biological warfare.”

“B-but that could be years from now...?”

“And yet, that is our only option. As long as the bacteria are within Kit, they’re

harmless. She is the most stable container for them. We have no other option but to keep her alive.”

He looked around at each of us.

“The fate of the world depends upon it.”

Everyone fell silent.

“If...” Kit said. “If you burn me, will it burn the poison? If you make me explode, like you did those things?”

Jesus Christ.

“What if the virus resists heat?” Tenjiki said. “There are viruses that can survive inside molten rock, withstanding temperatures in the hundreds of degrees. I don’t want to take a chance on that.”

There was no part of their conversation that didn’t boggle the mind.

Their conversation...

I’d said nothing this whole time. Just listened.

Partly because I was focused on driving, but also because I—Koumoto Kouji—was far more rattled by this than anyone else.

This conversation could decide the future of the world.

That was exactly what my parents had always said, and I had always assumed it was a con.

The key to everything lay in our—no, my hands.

If I were to swerve into incoming traffic and crash, what would happen?

Tenjiki might not die, but we would—and so would Kit.

We would have decided the fate of the world.

Many cults viewed humans as a filthy species that the world would be better off without. According to them, the ‘savior’ was the one with the power to wipe us out.

And I really, actually, had the power to be that savior. With a simple turn of the wheel.

“Heh... hehehe...”

I found myself laughing.

“Heheheheh... bwahahahahaha!”

It started out quiet, but by the end, was downright explosive.

“Bwahahahahahahaha! Hahaha!”

“K-Kouji!” Nozomi yelped, worried.

I just kept laughing. Thinking about Mitsuo.

He was our real savior. If it hadn’t been for him, the world would already be doomed.

And what had he been trying to say when he died? What had those unfinished last words meant?

C’mon, Mitsuo... you sacrificed yourself to save the world. What were you trying to say?

I was screaming inside.

“Yo, look at that!” Kasumi yelled, pointing. I snapped out it.

I checked my mirrors, and saw what he saw.

The doped fiends—they’d caught up to us. There was a pack of them following.

They had rollerblades on and were zipping along like Olympic speed skaters, chasing after us!

Swinging metal bats around, knocking aside any cars that got in their way, getting closer!

One of them got close enough to hit the van. There was a thud, and I had to fight for control of the vehicle. They were way too strong.

“Wh-what the...? This is all pure instinct?!”

I floored the gas, trying to pull away from them. But they just went faster, keeping up with us easily.

The cars around us panicked at the sight of this assault, and were running up on the sidewalk or crashing into each other.

“Definitely... they don’t care who sees this happening. They’re completely out of control,” Tenjiki said.

“And they’re increasing in number?” Kasumi said.

Tenjiki nodded. “Unlike Kit’s virus, there’s no trigger condition. All it takes is a bite, a little spit in a wound. Like vampires.”

“Then they’re as dangerous as she is!”

“But all we need to do is kill all of them. That condition won’t become airborne. The origin is chemical, not biological. And as the dosage gets thinner, the effect will lessen.”

“Then... no, wait. In that case, we...” Kasumi swallowed, hard. “Left on their own, they’d keep increasing in number... except we’re leading them on, gathering them all in the same place.”

We all gasped. He was right.

“Then you mean... this is the best chance to kill them?” I said, my voice shaking. “Tenjiki... can we do it?”

Tenjiki met my eyes in the rearview mirror.

He looked at Kasumi, Nanane, and Nozomi in turn.

The girls nodded.

For a long moment, he was silent. Then he smiled.

“I’m really glad I met all of you.”

Our hearts were as one.

I switched on the GPS. I’d kept it off because the company in charge would be able to locate the stolen vehicle if it was on, but there was no point in worrying about that now. I pressed a few buttons, enlarging the area shown.

“If we’re gonna lead them somewhere... where’s it gonna be? Somewhere with minimal population, cut off from the surrounding zones...”

I started looking, but Nanane said, “Oh!” loudly. “There! You know, where we went tracking the smell of blood!”

This clearly made sense to everyone.

She meant the planned development site of a high-rise commercial district—the first place our predictions led us after we met.

They’d started with the foundations, so there was a maze of pipelines running under them. It had all been ready to be turned into underground shopping spaces and fitted with fiber optic cables.

But the development had gotten bogged down, and the project was currently abandoned.

“That underground beehive is a good place to unleash my power without anyone seeing,” Tenjiki said, nodding.

I pressed a few buttons, searching for the fastest route to the coastal area where we could find the site.

The drugged-up fiends were still hot on our heels.

“Arghh!”

I spun the wheel and swung the van onto a side street.

The police were flooded with reports of the chaos. But by the time the patrol cars rolled up, we’d already passed through, and all they found were victims wailing, “Officer, what were those things?!” At this stage, nobody knew that thirteen people had died in a massacre at the weekly apartment building. The police had found the body of the one-eyed foreigner in the garbage that morning, but no one thought to tie it to this incident. They shouted all kinds of things at each other, but they had nothing to go on beyond rumors started by rubberneckers. Nobody knew the truth, but whether they knew it or not, the world was hurtling towards its doom.

Smashing through the barricade of plywood and nails, our van entered the underground dungeon of the abandoned construction site.

It wasn't sealed off completely, so there were pools of faint light inside. Not enough to turn the van's headlights off, though.

Our pursuers came running straight over the splintered remains of the barricade, without even slowing down. They just jumped right over it. It was hard to believe how light they were on their feet. Was that just pure instinct?

"What now? Farther in?" I asked Tenjiki.

"Find somewhere as narrow as possible... We don't want to get boxed in. We need a place where they can only attack from one direction."

"Got it!"

I turned, taking the van into a narrow passage.

This passage was still too wide. I looked for another road.

But then...

The runners behind us shifted into a weird formation. Three running shoulder to shoulder, the two outside lifting up the one in the middle.

"Huh? What are they..."

But we didn't have time to think. Their next move was blood-curdling.

They took the one they'd lifted up...and threw him at us.

Under us.

Our wheels rolled over him, bouncing us. I could feel the squish through the steering wheel.

But worse—there was no way I could keep the speed up.

"Wh-what the—?!"

They were using each other, like they were just spare parts. There was nothing we could do. The wheels were coated in gore, and we were sliding.

"Everyone hold on!"

The van spun like a top, and went hurtling through an area sealed off with yellow warning rails. There was nothing beyond it; just a sheer drop to a cavern.

We fell.

The bottom of the cavern was about ten meters deep. The suspension sure couldn't handle it. The whole lower end of the van was smashed in, but it had cushioned the impact for us. We took the hit hard, but remained mobile afterward.

We scrambled out of the crashed van and ran deeper in.

Instinctively pursuing their targets, they tried jumping down after them.

But the first to jump was still wearing roller blades, and when he landed his ankles bent, and he fell over. No mere sprain; he'd broken both his ankles.

The others took notice of this, knew the roller blades would harm them here, and stripped them off. They began to jump...onto the one with broken ankles.

His flesh cushioned their fall, making the drop safe for the rest. By the time they'd all landed, he was nothing but a blood bag, but none of them cared.

They continued their chase on foot.

"Th-they're here!" Kasumi roared.

We were running as fast as we could. But there was no way we could outrun them, not with them ignoring every natural limit of the human body. It was only a matter of time before they caught up.

We came out in a weird place.

To the side of the path was a set of pipes, headed diagonally downwards, like a centipede's legs.

"A-are those narrow enough?"

"Any of them go far enough?"

We peered at the pipes, trying to see.

Tenjiki moved to intercept our hunters, alone.

"Down here!" Kasumi said.

With Kit in his arms, he began sliding down one of the pipes. Nanane followed

after.

“Nozomi!” I yelled.

She was lagging behind. Unsteady on her feet. I ran over to her, and grabbed her hand.

“Come on!”

“I... I can’t...”

There was an explosion behind us. One of them had reached Tenjiki.

We jumped, and looked, just as he shouted, “Shit! One got past!”

He was right in front of us already.

He swung a knife, hurtling towards us.

It was too late. He was going right for Nozomi.

I tackled her, knocking her out of the way, but the three of us got tangled together. We tumbled down the pipes.

“K-Koumoto-kun!” Tenjiki Yuu screamed. But Nozomi, Koumoto and the fiend were already out of sight.

Enemy after enemy was piling in. He had a powerful combat ability, but the enemy had strength in numbers, and completely lacked fear.

Several of them got past and jumped down the pipes after the others. They were hell-bent on eliminating their prey.

“Argh!” He had to give up. There was no way for him to save them.

“Rrraghhhhh!”

He bit his lip so hard it split and began bleeding.

As they pushed him back, he knew he had to end this fight here. He had to keep as many as possible from the pipes Kasumi, Nanane, and Kit had taken.

A knife came flying at him, and he knocked it out of the air, shouting at the wave of monsters, “Come at me, then!”

At the end of the slide was a dark space, with standing water.

The monster that knocked us into the pipe had broken his neck somewhere along the slide. He tumbled down next to us, motionless.

“U-unh...”

Nozomi shook her head, getting to her feet. Whew. She was unharmed.

“K-Kouji—are you okay?!”

She turned to face me. I couldn’t do anything, so I stayed put.

Nozomi let out a high-pitched shriek that sounded like her world was ending. She’d seen it.

There was a knife buried deep in my chest. The tip had pierced all the way through my back.

“Kouji—oh my god, Kouji!”

She grabbed hold of me. I couldn’t move at all. The knife had pierced my solar plexus. My entire body felt numb. I didn’t even feel much pain.

But my whole body felt like it was being squeezed, like I was a rag and someone was wringing the water out of me. I couldn’t bear it.

“Kouji, Kouji!”

Sobbing, Nozomi shook me.

No use.

Nozomi, you can’t stay here.

You have to run. You can’t save me now. You have to get away...

I tried to tell her. But no words would leave my mouth.

The world was getting blurry. Nozomi’s crying face was fading like a mirage...
.....?

But then I saw a figure standing next to Nozomi. For some reason, I was able to clearly see that figure alone.

Oh...

I nodded. This made sense.

“Yo, Koumoto,” he said.

It was Kazumiya Mitsuo.

Oh, good... Mitsuo, I wanted to see you again.

I spoke to him in my heart. I asked what I’d wanted to ask.

Mitsuo, what was it you were trying to say? The last thing you said?

Mitsuo answered.

“Oh, nothing important. Just... at last, I knew what my job here was.”

He smiled.

Your job?

“What I was put here to do. My destiny, I guess? I mean, like Nanane always said, my power is pretty vague.”

It certainly was.

In my heart, I smiled back.

“And in that moment, I knew why.” Mitsuo nodded. “I was always feeble. Big body, weak will. If I’d predicted that with any degree of clarity...I wouldn’t have been able to do what I did. I’d never have been able to push Kasumi, Nanane, and that Kit kid out of the way and stand in their place. I’d have freaked out, and... so that’s why I was never clear on any of it.”

He sounded clear on this.

“I was a sad, half-baked man, but my ‘talent’? That was the real deal. I’m glad it worked out like it did. There was a reason for me being born.”

That same smile we’d all said made him look so dumb now felt so strong.

I see. Yeah. You were great. You saved the world. But I...

Everything felt indistinct, nothing felt clear, but I could feel vibrations coming toward us from above. They were almost on us.

But Nozomi was still with me, crying and trying to pull my body along.

I...

I was dying.

I didn't think anything of that. I was already 90% dead and long past being scared about it.

But I didn't think I could bear it if Nozomi died, too.

My life had been mostly meaningless. I'd grown up being told I'd save the world, but I couldn't even do that. I'd relied on my friends to the very end. My 'talent' had been of no use at all.

I wasn't breathing anymore. My heart must have stopped. I had only seconds of consciousness left.

But I still had something left to do. Something I had to do. Something I had to tell Nozomi.

I had to tell her to leave me, to run.

I had...

I had to, somehow.



7

TSUJI NOZOMI
Automatic

Tsuji Nozomi - Automatic

Tsuji Nozomi did not actually have any powers. No ‘talent’ like the others had. Her ‘Automatic,’ in which she sketched visions of the future, was entirely fictional. A performance. Like Tenjiki Yuu, she just made up stuff that seemed convincing.

And she did it all because she had loved Koumoto Kouji for years.

She’d started liking him back in elementary school. Everyone around her gossiped about him. “Koumoto? He’s like... *you know...*” She always thought, “But he isn’t!” She never said anything, but it angered her. She could tell Koumoto was always fighting something. He always looked so uncomfortable, but he never let it get the best of him; the way he always faced it head-on really impressed her. When no one was looking, she started talking to him. It was always Kouji who made sure no one caught them talking. He was afraid if anyone noticed, Nozomi would be ostracized, too. Even as a little kid, he always thought of things like that. Nozomi was sometimes frustrated by this, but she also knew he did it for her, and that only intensified her feelings for him.

But if that was all it was, her first love might well have faded without her ever realizing it was love. Koumoto Kouji would have taken over from his parents, and Tsuji Nozomi would definitely not have followed him there. They’d have lost contact once junior high started, and even if they ran into each other decades later, Kouji would have adjusted to life as a cult leader; sure of himself, but the struggle to retain his dignity long since lost. Meanwhile, the compromises any ‘grown-up’ woman faces would have left Nozomi out of touch with her feelings. They’d have had no means of finding that connection again.

But fate had other things in store for them.

When Koumoto Kouji’s ‘talent’ first activated, Nozomi was the only one with him. When Kouji told her not to tell anyone else, she knew he’d made up his mind.

This actual miracle would force Kouji to break off contact with his parents.

When that happened, Nozomi thought, he'd cut her off, too. To keep her out of whatever trouble it caused him.

This realization led her to lie impulsively. "You're not the only one, Kouji. I can do the same thing," she'd said. And she'd kept the act up for a decade.

They'd become partners. Even after they went to different junior high schools, even after he left home, even after Nozomi's parents divorced and she followed neither, electing instead to enter an art school and rent an apartment of her own.

The whole time, their relationship continued.

It was always a very distant relationship; they'd spent years together and barely even held hands. They were just two people with similar powers, who'd become friends because of that.

Even so, Nozomi enjoyed what she had. Yet she was always anxious. Would he figure it out some day? Part of her wanted to know what Kouji would do if he did. Would he forgive her? Would he realize at last how she felt, why she'd followed him all this time? Hope and anxiety mingled, leaving her desperate to tell him, but unable to risk it. While not the life she'd hoped for, it was certainly one that kept her heart beating.

But now—

"Kouji! Kouji!"

In the darkness underground, Nozomi sobbed, clinging to Koumoto Kouji's unmoving body.

"Come on! Answer me! Say something, Kouji!"

There was no sign of the calm, collected girl her friends knew. Tears were gushing down her cheeks, her face twisted with despair.

Koumoto Kouji's body was unbelievably heavy. The puddle they'd landed in had soaked his clothes through. And Nozomi's arms were the only thing supporting the full weight of his limp body.

She could hear the creatures that had been coming after them getting closer.

But she kept on dragging Kouji further and further in.

“Kouji, Kouji! This isn’t happening! This can’t be true! Kouji!”

Words flooded out of her, barely making sense. She could see he wasn’t breathing. But she couldn’t wrap her mind around it. Her brain refused to accept it.

“Kouji! Say something! Kouji...!”

She heard splashes as their pursuers landed in the puddle.

She pulled Koumoto Kouji’s body harder, desperate.

But he was too heavy for her, and slipped out of her hands. She stumbled, tripped over him and fell face first into a puddle.

She sat up gasping, and the enemy was right in front of her.

Nozomi didn’t try to back away. She just threw her arms around Koumoto Kouji, clinging to him.

His body was already cold. The chill of the water had robbed him of his warmth. And whatever functions generated body heat had almost completely ceased.

But Nozomi didn’t let him go. She held him tight.

“Kouji...!”

She closed her eyes.

Then...

Then she heard a sound. Far away, yet close by. It was hard to judge the distance.

At first she thought it was the wind.

But it grew louder.

A bizarre hissing whistle, like no other sound on earth.

The sound instinctively put the fiends on guard. They stopped, keeping their distance.

The sound was coming from the corpse in Nozomi's arms.

Nozomi opened her eyes.

She knew this sound. She'd heard it more often than anyone else.

It was the sound of Whispering activating.

But Kouji's body no longer lived. His mouth hung open, not moving. And yet, from within it came a shrill whine, like wind escaping.

"...rrroooooobbbsssssggrrrrrrroooooaaaaaaaar.....!!"

It did not form any recognizable words. These were words from a world not yet born, that did not yet exist. Words from the far distant future, words that were, as yet, only a possibility. These words were the scream of someone putting their life on the line in whatever world it was they lived in.

It was a shout. A roar. The desperate, throat-ripping shriek of someone protecting the thing most precious to them.

Modern man could not possibly understand the meaning of these words, yet they were thrown through time, into the distant past, echoing from the throat of a boy no longer able to move.

The sound shook the air, filling this underground room.

Nozomi stared down at Kouji's lifeless face, dazed.

She had no idea what was happening.

At last the scream faded, and the cave was silent again.

The fiends waited, on guard, making sure whatever it was had passed.

Then they began moving closer to her.

Nozomi stayed still, not moving.

One of the fiends leapt, grabbing her shoulder, trying to rip her apart.

In that instant, there was a soft sound, like something slicing through the air, and the arm pulling Nozomi's shoulder...was suddenly severed with a sickeningly wet sound.

The fiend lost its balance, and fell over. The beasts backed away, observing.

Nozomi looked down at the severed arm on her shoulder. It slid off, landing in the water with a splash. Nozomi felt no surprise. She looked up at the fiends, then followed their gaze.

A figure stood in the shadows. It spoke to her, softly. "I heard his scream. It led me here." A strange voice, androgynous; it could be read as either male or female.

Nozomi was not surprised. She just assumed she'd gone mad. She knew the shadow standing before her. Not just her; all the girls who lived around here knew who this was.

A black hat and a black cape. A white face with black lipstick. Everyone knew the shinigami.

Everyone knew Boogiepop.

The fiends screamed wordlessly and threw themselves at their new foe.

Something in the air around Boogiepop glinted, like thread catching the light. A moment later, the creatures in the lead fell apart, their bodies sliced to pieces. Was that monofilament?

To Nozomi, it looked like something as fine as thread had been quickly wrapped around the fiends, and then yanked tight so fast it cut right through them. Certain she'd gone mad, she watched, perfectly calm.

The fiends were long past fear, but for the first time, they looked surprised. They took a step back.

Boogiepop was right in front of them, instantly moving closer.

Three more fiends fell to pieces, bits of their bodies splashing into the water around them.

Boogiepop was so fast, so precise, its motions so refined that Nozomi was sure it must be a machine. Nozomi's own power was a fake, but this was real,

an automatic *thing* moving with no mind of its own. There was a hiss as something sped past her and the liquid it flung off landed on her cheek.

It was blood. The heat of it shook her. The feel of the blood was so real she could not believe it was the product of a mind gone mad.

She gasped and looked around her.

It had been less than a minute. Mere seconds!

There were no fiends left anywhere. Just a black shadow standing quietly nearby. Boogiepop looked down at her. The shinigami's eyes were cold, like ice. The light of them transfixed Nozomi. She couldn't move.

Boogiepop glanced down at Koumoto Kouji's unmoving body. It spoke. "*That* is gone," it said, coldly. "You may cling to it if you wish, but that voice... that scream did not belong to this world. It coming here was...a miracle. A miracle that gave you a path to live, and if you choose to cling to the body of the one who performed a miracle to save you... well, that is up to you."

Nozomi stiffened like she'd been struck by lightning.

Her lips shook. But no words came out.

Boogiepop glared silently down at her.

"B-but...but..." she said. She couldn't talk.

"I know not whose will brought that scream here. But if you waste the life it has given you, then you rob that will of meaning, too, without ever knowing why you survived."

Boogiepop's words overpowered her, echoing through the darkness, without mercy, without emotion.

Unable to bear it, Nozomi looked down. For a brief instant, she thought she saw a smile on Koumoto Kouji's lifeless face.

It was just an illusion. He was long past moving.

But Nozomi was sure she'd seen it. She was sure Kouji had smiled at her.

There was only one thing that that could mean. Kouji had been so damn serious. He'd never been one to understand complex feelings. She knew exactly

what he'd say to her now.

“Nozomi, you always give up so fast. That ain't good. No matter how hard things get, you gotta push forward.”

That sort of self-help-book bullshit was all he ever said.

“Kouji.”

She slowly let her hands fall from his corpse, and looked up.

She blinked, surprised.

The cloaked figure was gone.



8

MIKAGE KASUMI
Into Eyes

Mikage Kasumi - Into Eyes

The unearthly scream echoed through the passage, all the way to where Nanane and I were.

“What the—?!” Nanane said, scared. She looked at me.

I stuck my face in the pipe we’d slid down, and yelled up. No one else had come after us.

“Hey! What’s going on?”

I heard an explosion in the distance, then Yuu’s voice.

“Run, Kasumi-kun!”

“What? Come on! What happened to Koumoto and Tsuji?!”

“Forget them. You have to sur—”

His voice cut off, drowned out by a series of explosions and thuds.

“Hey! Talk to me!” I yelled.

Nanane grabbed my arm.

“Stop, Kasumi-kun. Do as he says.”

There were tears in her eyes.

Kit was looking up at us, anxious.

“Damn it!”

I punched the side of the pipe, then picked up Kit and ran. Nanane came after us. She quickly passed me, scouting the path ahead.

But—were Koumoto and Tsuji really dead? I’d seen Mitsuo with my own eyes, but even that still didn’t feel real.

Fuck. What was going on? Why was it *me* still running, not those three?

Why was I always the one left behind?

“Shit shit shit shit shit...!”

Before I knew it, I was swearing with each breath I took.

“Sorry,” Kit said, shaking in my arms. “If I... I...”

“Shut up!” I said. “If you start talking like that, how would they feel? You don’t have to think about a damn thing but staying alive, okay?”

My voice was really loud.

Kit flinched. She felt so small.

“Kasumi-kun, this way...!”

Nanane had found a split in the road and was pointing in one direction.

There was a noise behind us; something landing at the base of the pipe.

They’d made it through Yuu’s defensive line and were right on our heels again.

“Nanane! Take her!” I said, handing Kit over. Nanane staggered; Kit was too heavy. Kit wriggled out of her arms onto the ground.

“Wh-what are you...?”

“The rest is in your hands,” I said, and pulled out the gun I’d been hiding in my uniform.

It was fully loaded.

I’d already figured out where the safety was. I took it off.

“K-Kasumi-kun! No, we can’t fight them!”

“Course not! That’s why I’m holding them off! You get Kit the hell out of here!”

“I don’t want that!” Nanane shrieked. “I’m not leaving without you!”

I ignored her, and looked at Kit.

“Can you run?” I said.

Kit didn’t answer.

“Tell me you can get away from them.”

“I don’t know. But I’ll try.”

She was shaking like a leaf.

Okay. I nodded.

“Kasumi-kun! If you’re staying then I... I’ve got no reason to live...” Nanane was sobbing.

“There’s your reason,” I said, looking at her tears. The idea coming to me as I spoke.

“Huh...?”

“You’re able to cry. At the café, you cried for my dead friend. I’ve never cried for him, not once. So...” I laughed, softly. “That’s why. Your life has more meaning than mine ever will.”

Nanane blinked at me.

Yeah. None of us ever really cared about the future. Making predictions, using our abilities to the fullest... all that crap was just an excuse.

The truth was that we all just really liked each other. We all valued the others more than we did ourselves, and that’s why the six of us were always together. That’s why finding out what Yuu really was didn’t matter, that’s why it didn’t matter that Tsuji didn’t have any powers—I’d noticed, at least. Our powers and talents never mattered in the first place.

I could hear their footsteps getting closer.

Nanane wasn’t moving, so I took her hand and Kit’s, and started running. They came with me. I let go of their hands and ran with them a bit.

And when I had to, I turned around.

They were right on our heels. Moving much faster than us. If I’d just kept running, they’d have caught us.

I fired the gun.

They just ran straight at me, so I hit the first one straight in the chest, and he flipped over. I guess their ‘instincts’ didn’t tell them anything about guns.

“Kasumi-kun!”

“Protect Kit! Go!” I yelled.

Nanane was moving too fast to stop. Just as I’d hoped, she kept running.

I went to fire a second time at the next fiend.

And I realized...

My hands were shaking.

I’d been fine the first time I fired, but when I went to fire again my hands were all over the place.

Belatedly, I was realizing just what it meant to shoot someone.

It was scary, like a storm raging through my heart.

“Argh...!”

But the enemies were getting closer.

I clenched my jaw, trying to stop my teeth from chattering, and fired a second time. I wasn’t exactly aiming properly, but the enemy was too close to miss, and I hit him in the hip. He went down.

“Arghhhhh...!”

I couldn’t stop it.

They continued to come straight at me.

I fired.

They went down.

Another came. I fired again.

I had six bullets, and I took six of them down. More were coming, but I’d spent a lot of time practicing reloading and it was a reflex by now.

Teeth chattering, I kept on shooting. I had a mountain of corpses in front of me.

I could hear someone breathing heavily in the distance. I listened closer, and realized it was my own breath.

“Rraghhhh...!”

A groan escaped my lips. I don't know why.

I turned, staggering, and ran after Nanane and Kit.

In time, I saw her ahead of me. I tried to catch up to them. Then a thought struck me.

I didn't feel like I deserved to be with them anymore. I'd killed people.

I was a murderer.

"Ergh...!"

I staggered, and stopped.

The two girls ran off into the distance.

And I just stood there...

All of a sudden, the wall between me and the girls was smashed in. The passage was a pipe and someone had kicked the side of it in.

"—!"

I snapped out of it and pointed my gun at the hole in the wall.

I didn't know if I could bring myself to fire it again. If that happened, I'd definitely be...

The girls turned to look.

I tried to tell them to keep running. But before I could, a shadow came through the hole, turning towards them.

Like I'd feared, my arms were shaking so hard I couldn't aim. The bullet went wild.

No use...

I knew I didn't have time to try again.

But something unexpected happened.

"Wait! Don't shoot!" the shadow said. A girl's voice.

The monsters running after us hadn't said a word.

“I’m on your side! I’m human! Don’t shoot!”

She held both hands up, standing where I could see her. She was wearing a leather jumpsuit, but she was definitely female. But she was...

Behind her, Kit called out happily. She ran toward her.

“You’re alive! Thank goodness!” she said, and threw her arms around the woman.

The woman hugged her back.

“You were worried about me? Thanks,” she said.

“How’d you get away?”

“A friend came to save me. Threw me a weapon. If he hadn’t, it would have been bad.”

She patted Kit on the head.

I... I knew her.

“K... Kirima Nagi?”

That was her name. Kirima looked at me.

“Fancy meeting you here, Mikage. Haven’t seen you since elementary school.”

Even then, she’d talked like a boy.

“How are you here...?”

“We hacked the control system for the GPS on the car you stole. And the gunshots. Only humans fire guns.”

I gaped at her. Nanane came running up after Kit.

“Wh-what’s going on? Who are you? Kit-chan, you know her?”

Kit nodded.

Kirima bowed her head once.

Silence settled over the darkness again.

Remnants of the fight drifted in the air, the dust of the dead caught by a few stray rays of light. Nothing in the darkness moved. Tenjiki Yuu—the synthetic human Eugene—sat perfectly still. His right shoulder was twisted badly and his arm hung limp. His left leg, too, was badly broken at the thigh. Half his right side was torn off, and smoke rose where he'd cauterized the wound.

Eugene was staring aimlessly.

There were corpses all around him--the remains of those he'd blown away covered the ground, like scattered leaflets. There was a smile on Eugene's lips.

The enemies that got by him had been shot down by his friends. He could tell by the gunshots and footsteps. He'd done what he had to do.

"Man, that was rough," he whispered. He wasn't confident his body would be able to repair this much damage. There was a strong chance he'd blown past his regenerative limits. If he had, then he'd fade out here.

"Right, everyone? This one was real hard."

He spoke like his friends were right there with him.

He looked down.

There was one question still on Eugene's mind.

What are we doing?

He felt like the price had been far too great. They'd thrown themselves into something they had no business being involved in, children goofing around until they'd crossed a line. Maybe that was true.

But the responsibility they'd been given was too great. They'd had to face a threat to the world itself—and that was just too much.

Or was it the other way around? Instead of this all coming our way...

As he thought, Eugene could feel his consciousness fading. His body was preparing to go into hibernation, conserving resources as much as possible. Once asleep, there was no telling if he'd ever wake up again.

Was it always going to turn out like this?

Had they gathered together to face this threat, and done their duty?

Had destiny—or whatever holds the world itself in balance—controlled them, and therefore...

...when the time came, flipped the switch?

He looked at the bodies around him.

A frown crossed his face.

Anyone he attacked would undergo a chemical explosion, so the remains would be burned. But the body he was looking at had been cut to pieces, a clean cut like a butcher's knife.

"What the...?"

He looked around, and saw a number of bodies in the same condition.

Only then did Eugene notice.

Slowly—not just because he was weakened, but also out of fear—he raised his head. A figure was standing in the shadows nearby. It did not look human. More like a pipe rising up out of the darkness, half-melted into its surroundings.





Staring silently at him.

“Oh... I see, Mikage-kun. This is where we meet,” Eugene sighed.

The shadow moved closer to him. Eugene didn't move. He couldn't move, and didn't feel like running. “You helped? Or was I the one helping with your job?” he asked. Then he shook his head. “It doesn't matter now.” He stared blearily up at the shinigami before him. The figure reflected in his eyes.

On its face was a strange, asymmetrical expression: half smile, half playing dumb.

It pulled something out of its cloak and held it out to him.

“You forgot this,” it said, softly.

Eugene managed to raise his left hand and take it.

His eyes went wide.

It was the sketchbook—Tsuji Nozomi must have dropped it as she fled.

He flipped it open.

It was filled with her drawings.

He turned the pages until he found the drawing she'd done of him.

Tenjiki Yuu, half-undressed, far more beautiful and angelic-looking than he ever really was.

“I thought you should have it,” the shinigami said. But Eugene could no longer hear its voice.

He was laughing.

The laugh just bubbled out of him, and he was helpless to stop it. He was so weak the laugh barely made a sound. A silent laugh.

His body shaking, his wounds throbbing, still he laughed.

Along the way, the shadowy figure vanished, but he never noticed. He just stared down at the drawing, laughing.

“No sounds anywhere. I think it’s over.”

Kirima Nagi had a small mic with a sucker on the end, attached to a small machine like a Walkman. She pulled the earphone out and turned back to us, nodding.

“We’re the only things moving in this underground dungeon.”

“Oh,” I said.

It was over.

That’s what she meant.

But my hands could still feel everyone I’d killed.

I was scared to go near Nanane or Kit, as if my corruption would spread to them.

“Mikage,” Kirima said, stepping close. “You did what you had to do. That’s all. Those were not humans. If you think about it, you saved them from doing something no human should ever do. Got it?”

She was blunt, but there was a warmth behind it.

“Yeah, maybe,” I said, nodding. But I knew I’d never forget how this felt.

“What now?” Nanane said, her hands on Kit’s shoulders. “How can we keep Kit-chan safe?”

“My Sensei’s well-traveled. He knows people all over. If we ask him, he should be able to keep her hidden for years, no problem.”

Kirima looked at Kit.

“That okay with you?”

Kit nodded. “Mm.”

“Good... that’s a relief,” Nanane said. Like a weight off her shoulders.

“Let’s get moving,” Kirima said. She hoisted Kit up on her shoulders.

“Wait, first... the others, they’re...”

If they were dead, we had to get their bodies, at least.

“They’re alive,” Kirima said, curtly. Nanane and I both gaped at her. “They’re alive, and escaped safely. Don’t think otherwise. Trust me.” She didn’t wait for an answer, or even glance in our direction.

Neither of us argued. We just started walking, following her. Our feet dragged. We were both exhausted. Far, far too much had happened.

“Hey, Kasumi-kun. You remember?” Nanane said.

“Mm?”

“We’ve been here before,” she said, half-crying. I knew all too well how she felt.

“Yeah,” I said.

“The six of us... we weren’t trying to do anything, weren’t trying to find anything, not really. We never needed anything. We were happy the way we were, and didn’t need anything else at all...”

Her voice came in and out, but the words kept flooding out of her.

“Yeah,” I said, unable to do more than nod.

“We had everything we could ever want. We had so much fun.”

And then, Kirima said, “Pandora.”

I didn’t know what she meant, but when I looked up at her she just shook her head.

“Never mind,” she said.

Nanane kept talking. “It really was true. Back then, back with the smell of blood, we just...”

9 Blood



Blood

It started, like everything that came after, in a room at a karaoke place.

“Dark and quiet, long and far,” Mitsuo-kun said. As nonsensical as ever.

“What the heck?! Does that even mean anything?!” I said. I swear I’d already said this to him more times than I could count. We’d all decided to try and find out more about the smell of blood I’d predicted.

“That’s what it is, I can’t help it,” Mitsuo-kun shrugged.

“Now, now, let’s think this through,” Tenjiki-kun said, patting Mitsuo-kun on the shoulder.

“Maybe a tunnel?” Nozomi-chan said. “Seems about right.”

Her hand was already moving across her notebook, drawing lots of tunnel-like things.

“Like this?”

“Mm... bigger than that.”

“A big tunnel,” Koumoto-kun said, spreading out a map. “There aren’t that many tunnels around. Anything like a tunnel, but different?”

“Like a subway?” Kasumi-kun said. Both of them had already given up using their powers this time, saying they just weren’t working. It happened.

“Nobody around. At night, the subway should be deserted.”

“True... but is that the same as ‘quiet’?”

“Hmm, good point... no, no, wait. The reason Into Eyes won’t work is *because* there’s nobody there. Because we don’t run into anyone.”

“Makes sense. Explains why mine won’t work either... no words for me to catch.”

“That wouldn’t matter, Kouji,” Nozomi said in level tones. “You could just

catch something one of us says. You always blame your failings on something else.”

Koumoto scowled.

“Now, now, let him be.” Tenjiki-kun again.

I was just laughing at all of this.

Then Kasumi-kun said, “You think, too, Nanane. This is your thing!”

But it was funny, so I just kept laughing.

By this point Mitsuo-kun had started laughing, too. He was easily influenced like that; always the first to join in. Koumoto-kun’s scowl relaxed a bit, and he chuckled, too. Even Nozomi-chan managed a grin. Tenjiki-kun was always smiling. Only Kasumi-kun was left. He just rolled his eyes at us. But there was a trace of a smile there.

“Okay, let’s try and straighten this out,” Koumoto-kun said, and we all sat up.

Eventually we narrowed it down to the underground areas beneath this development site, and the next day we sneaked in.

But we explored and explored and found nothing. No big bags of money like that one time; not even any rats.

“What’s going on?” Mitsuo-kun said.

“This was *your* prediction!” Koumoto-kun said, frustrated.

Before long, we were lost. We’d taken precautions, but got lost anyway. We were done exploring; now we were just trying to find our way out. However, our road was blocked by overgrown weeds and we felt even more like explorers. We slipped through rusted cracks in the iron framework, and tiptoed along narrow paths with seawater splashing down through cracks above our heads.

It took us four hours to find our way out. We were all completely exhausted.

“Argh... what was the point of all that?!” Kasumi-kun roared, flopping down on the grass, arms flung out.

“Never...again...” Nozomi-chan said, sinking to the ground.

“I dunno... it was pretty fun,” Koumoto said, stubbornly.

“Ahaha, it sure was,” Mitsuo-kun agreed.

“And whose fault is this?” I yelled.

“I need a shower!” Nozomi-kun said, inspecting herself. “I’m covered in dirt.”

“Yeah, I smell weird,” I said, sniffing my shoulder.

Then I yelped aloud.

“Wh-what?”

“What’s up?”

Everyone looked at me. I just flapped my lips uselessly.

“Th-th-th-this is it! This smell...”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Everyone started sniffing. They blinked.

“Rusty metal... salt water... and the harsh smell of those weeds... wait, Nanane, you mean...”

Kasumi-kun glared at me.

“Ah... ahaha... um...”

“This is the scent of ‘blood’? You know, it does sort of smell like it...” Mitsuo-kun said.

“True... we all smell the same,” Tenjiki-kun said, smiling.

“Jesus...” Koumoto-kun said, shaking his head.

“S-sorry...” I said.

“Well, shit happens, I guess,” Nozomi-chan said. Even though she was the most worn out. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it, Nanane,” Koumoto-kun said.

“Not the first time!” Kasumi-kun yelled, laughing. “How many more dumb things are we gonna do?”

“I hope we never stop,” Nozomi-chan said, laughing, too.

Koumoto-kun and Tenjiki-kun started laughing, but Mitsuo-kun frowned. “Can we really call this a failure, though?” he said.

I was, weirdly, on the verge of tears. I started laughing just to try and hide that.

“Yeah, let’s do this forever! Let’s never learn a thing! Waaaay into the future, no matter how many predictions we make!”

As if matching our mood, the sky was clear and blue, with not a cloud in sight.

Kasumi-kun and I followed Kit-chan and Kirima-san out of the tunnels to find the sky every bit as blue.

I had nothing to say, so I said nothing.

Kasumi-kun stood next to me, looking as grim as I felt.

Kirima-san had a cell phone, and was calling somewhere. Kit-chan was sound asleep on her back. Couldn’t blame her. She’d gone all out.

“Mm, yeah. I’m fine... huh? Already? Okay, got it. Yeah, you be careful too, Kentaro. Yeah, the usual spot. Bye.”

She hung up and turned back to us.

“The cops are on their way. Make sure neither of you go anywhere you’ve ever been before. Ditch your pagers, anything like that.”

She was used to this sort of thing. Her instructions were clear and precise.

“Yeah, got it,” Kasumi-kun nodded.

“You got anywhere to go?”

“We’ll get by. You take care.”

“Same to you. And you, Nanane-san.”

“Mm...” I said. I brushed Kit-chan’s sleeping cheek and softly said, “Goodbye.”

Kirima-san used a belt to secure Kit-chan to her back, then got on her motorcycle and sped away. We watched them until they were out of sight.

“So... what should we do now?” Kasumi-kun sighed.

“Kasumi-kun...” I said, at last. “I’ve been lying to you.”

“Huh?”

“I ran away from home. I haven’t been to school. I’ve just been crashing in one place or another.”

Everything I’d been hiding just came pouring out of me. I didn’t know why. I just felt like I had to tell him.

“Oh,” he said. That was all.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lied. I’m awful.”

“So what now?”

“I’m going back home. Back to school. I don’t know how that’ll turn out... I doubt I’ll ever get on with my mom. But I’ll talk to her, at least. If we really need to break things off, then... that’s fine. If I have to quit school, then I’ll quit.”

I hadn’t really thought this through. I was just saying it.

Kasumi-kun said nothing.

“Ahaha, it won’t be that easy, will it?”

I forced a smile, and he smiled back.

“You’re amazing, you know,” he said.

There was a real warmth behind his words, spoken from the heart. I hadn’t expected anything like this from him, and I felt my heart skip a beat.

“I should be more like you,” he added.

“Wh-what...are you an idiot? I’m not... I’m nothing to...” I couldn’t find the words to finish that thought.

But Kasumi-kun just looked at me, smiling gently.

I saw myself in his eyes.

“You see yourself in my eyes?” Kasumi-kun asked.

I nodded.

“Then you’re seeing the future. You and I will meet again. I’m sure,” he said.

I almost burst into tears right there, but I made myself say, “So, how do you smell?”

“Like blood, I guess? Same as you,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Then that smell tells our future. You and I will get ourselves in some deep shit again someday!” I said, pointing dramatically, like a teacher in an anime.

We both laughed.

Our laughter wasn’t the pure, unbridled joy it once was, but...there was a warmth there still, one more precious than anything in the world.

“See you later!”

“Yeah!”

We shouted, raised our arms, and slapped our hands together, hard.

The sound echoed across the blue skies and we went our separate ways, once and for all.

Afterword:

Does anybody really know what time it is?

...is a really long, confusing English title to give this book, but it's the name of a song by a band called the Chicago Transit Authority. Not that it matters.

So. Have you ever wished you'd never been born? Gawd, Kadono, there you go again...! I'm sure you're all sick of it, but just bear with me a moment! Let me be clear, whether you're three years old or eighty-eight, you *have* encountered the kind of joy that makes you feel like it was worth being born any number of times. We all have. You've just forgotten it.

So. Have you ever had a bad fight with a close friend, and never spoken to them again? Maybe not that close, maybe not even someone you'd known that long. But someone you think about occasionally and wonder if things could have ended differently. If you say there's no one, well, that's fine. But if you're saying "Oh yeah," or "Definitely"...it's not too late! Go ask them if there's anything you can still do! And if they're no longer reachable (often the case) then at least try not to repeat that same mistake with those still close to you. Or have you forgotten how painful and awkward and unbearable that break-up was?

...You forgot, didn't you? We all do. Oh, yeah. I'm here writing this and I've forgotten sooo much, honestly. "You know, that one guy sat next to me in cram school once, we whispered to each other the whole time, what was his name again? I'm sure he told me... tip of my tongue..." Tons of stuff like that, and it was super fun at the time but now it's just a hazy memory. And the kind of joy that makes you glad you were born is just like that, nothing special at a glance, not at all the sort of thing you'd particularly remember... you know what I mean? Doesn't need to be a fated encounter or a torrid love affair or billowing

pleasure or whatever, nah, much more like, “You know the thing, ain’t it so?”
“Yeah, totally.” Simple little agreements like that, a smile and a nod, little stuff like that—that’s what gives us a ‘reason,’ don’t you think? A meaning to our being born? That’s all it is, that’s what it is, yeah?

...If you’ve totally forgotten everything like that, oh well, you’ll just have to go do it again. But if you have genuinely never encountered anything like that, then, oh well, you’ll just have to do what the weirdo in the black hat says.

“That’s your job.”

(I say this, but aren’t I just starting fights all the time?)

(Whatever.)

(No, seriously, though...)

BGM “LIFE SAVER” from CHICAGO VII

About the Author Born in 1968, Kouhei Kadono grew up uncertain about his direction in life. He spent a considerable portion of his early years frittering away his youth before somehow ending up writing novels.

In 1997, Kadono-sensei's first *Boogiepop* novel, *Boogiepop and Others*, took First Place in the Media Works' Dengeki Game Novel Contest. Early the following year, the novel was released to widespread acclaim and ignited the Japanese "light novel" (young adult) trend. Since that time, Kadono-sensei has written thirteen *Boogiepop* novels and several related works such as the *Beat's Discipline* short story collection and the two *Boogiepop* manga series entitled *Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh* and *Boogiepop Dual*. In its entirety, the *Boogiepop* series has seen over two million copies in print and spawned a live action movie and a hit anime series.

In addition to the *Boogiepop* universe, Kadono-sensei's body of literary work includes a wide array of fantasy and mystery novels such as the *Jiken*, *Soul Drop*, *Limited World* and *Night Watch* series.

About the Illustrator Born in 1970, a native of Osaka, Kouji Ogata spent his early twenties struggling to get enough credits to graduate from Osaka Design School. In late 1996, Ogata-sensei was commissioned by Media Works to illustrate the first *Boogiepop* novel, *Boogiepop and Others*.

At the time, Ogata-sensei was simply a rising star with a distinctive, eye-catching art style, but he was gradually able to further hone his artistic skills with each subsequent work. His watercolor-style paneling seen in the two-volume *Boogiepop Doesn't Laugh* manga series was a particularly high point of his early career.

In addition to providing illustrations for novels and manga, Ogata-sensei has been involved with supplying character designs for anime productions including *Boogiepop Phantom*, *Spirit*, and *Gin-iro no kami no Agito*.

In his free time, he enjoys motorcycles, tennis, and remote-controlled models.



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